

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

FEBRUARY



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

FEATURE NOVEL

● GUNSMOKE HOLDS THE RANGE

by TOM ROAN

TWO NOVELETTES

● COME AND GET IT, LAWDOG!

by FRED GIPSON

● THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE

by GEORGE A. SHAFTEL

● BLACKBURN ● KETCHUM
● GULICK ● HOLMES ● LANE
● RHODES ● GEORGE



FOR VICTORY
WE READ AND OBEY



PRAISE THE LORD

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. For I discovered that when a man finds the dynamic, invisible Power which is God, that man possesses a priceless heritage. Failure, fear, confusion go out of the life, and in the place of these things, there comes a sweet assurance that the Power which created the universe is at the disposal of all. And life takes on a brighter hue when the fact is fully known that at any hour of the day or night the amazing Power of Almighty God can be thrown against any and all undesirable circumstances—and they disappear.

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DR. FRANK E. ROBINSON
Founder "Psychiana"
Moscow, Idaho

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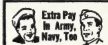
increased. I have N. R. I.
to thank for my start in this
field." **ARLIE J. FROEH-
NICH**, 360 W. Texas Ave.,
Gosse Creek, Texas.

**Lieutenant in
Signal Corps**

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vulge any infor-
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type of work but
I can say that
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is certainly coming in mighty
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and address omitted for mili-
tary reasons.)



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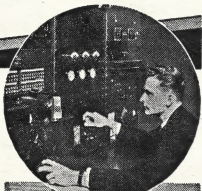
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and make \$5 to \$10 a week extra, fixing Radios
in spare time.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
FEBRUARY 10TH

VOLUME XX

FEBRUARY, 1943

NUMBER 3

1—Complete Novel—1

GUNSMOKE HOLDS THE RANGE.....Tom Roan 12

A cow-country fighting man's loyalty didn't end at the grave, by Ridge Henshaw's code. And it told him he must stay on at his dead boss's Circle Bar ranch till he'd driven the fright from a brave girl's eyes—or died trying!

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A bronco-busting sheriff was due to lose his job, his girl, and his self-respect unless he could nab a slick, deadly bank robber—who had set the stage for his most daring job behind the bars of the local jail!

THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE.....George Armin Shafstel 86

How could Jim Monahan, hot on the trail of his double-crossing partner, ever guess that between himself and the red death sweeping the frontier—stood only Mrs. McGaa's old milk cow?

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A one-legged tinker vowed he and his cranky old mule would stop the Benbow County range-war—with a stolen rifle he didn't dare shoot!

ONE TOO MANY DIABLOS!.....Bill Gulick 43

Neither Juan nor his horse Diablo ever touched hard liquor any more... Then along came Juan's arch-enemy with a gallon of happy dreams—and trouble!

LODESTAR'S AMATEUR LAWMAN.....L. P. Holmes 66

Mild, honest Cappy Daniels bet his last chip on a condemned murderer's tip—and took his chances at spending the rest of his life in prison!

PANAMINT PLUNDER.....David George 75

Crooked or crazy or honest, old Shorty Norris, the prospector, worked his mine in the dark of the moon—so he could hand a big-time crook a costly horse laugh!

THE WILD BLOOD.....Philip Ketchum 78

The law came first, in Marshal Matt Starrett's book. And he'd be damned if he'd ride with one outlaw brother—to save another from a murderer's hangnoose!

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Sudden death in a pair of yellow boots had the drop on hell-roaring Pendleton town—until a wise old sawbones burned a witch and broke the jinx!

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Editor Brant Jackson knew of only one way to trap La Paz's back-stabbing traitor—with an overdose of printer's ink!

Western Feature

OUR NEW FRONTIER.....The Editor 6

In Africa, Europe and Asia, they're fighting for an ideal dear to the heart of the West.

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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OF THE
ARMED FORCES
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OUR NEW FRONTIER

MORE and more, as the months pass and we work our way closer to our allies—closer in spirit and understanding as well as in the actual geographic positions of our armies—it becomes apparent that something very fine is going to come out of this war. And it is appropriate that we should take special note of it in *10 Story Western*, inasmuch as it looks very much like the fruition of a tradition that found much of its early growth on the American frontier.

For lack of a better name, it can be called the fellowship of man. In this year of 1943, with virtually all the nations of the world locked in the most destructive war of all time, it may seem to some that the fellowship of man, instead of taking a forward step, is suffering stupendous reverses from which it will be slow in recovering. Yet that is far from the case.

We are fighting for the same thing, we men and women of the United Nations. We are fighting, at the moment, to smash a combine of world gangsters whose aim is to crush us, one and all, under the tyrant's heel. And, beyond that, we are fighting for certain specific human rights that are as dear to the hearts of a Russian, a Chinese, an Englishman, as they are to an American.

The ideals for which we are fighting, unequivocally stated in the Atlantic Charter, are human, intensely personal objectives. From the mouth of President Roosevelt, when he gave utterance to the United Nations' determination to carry the Four Freedoms to the far corners of the globe, was speaking the voice of the people of the world.

Freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of speech, freedom of worship—those have been prime goals of struggling man since the beginning of time. We can all understand them. As individuals, men in every land have been seeking them. They have none of the cold, distant, hollow ring of the agreements between nations we are accustomed to hear. They are warm, vital, clear.

We are fighting for a square deal—not only for ourselves but for all the rest of mankind. And when each new day brings in accounts of the heroic fortitude with which the men and women of other nations are carrying on the battle, we are constantly reminded of our common aim. More and more clearly we see the singleness of our purpose.

And that's where the fellowship of man

comes in. Some commentators have told us that this war is in reality a world revolution, that much of the old political machinery is outmoded and must be replaced to meet the needs of a maturing civilization. That may be true. We wouldn't know. But the thing that does seem pretty apparent from where we sit is that the needs and aspirations of man—the common man of every nation, race or creed—are due for a major share of our governments' attention for years to come.

Working together later, as we are fighting together now, we two-legged animals seem destined to grow ever closer in sympathy, understanding, mutual respect.

We in America, probably better than in any other land in the world, know how tenuous are the differences between people of other nations and how readily they adjust themselves under conditions of equal opportunity. In our great human melting pot, we have welcomed emigrants from every land. America offered them citizenship, opening her arms to them, giving them the same chances for working, acquiring wealth, living in peace and harmony, that she gave to her native sons.

The policy proved its wisdom. Very soon, in their adopted land, the newcomers were not only better off, but America was, too. Everyone gained. And the reason is that the differences and jealousies and bitternesses that had been directing their lives in their former homes soon vanished, under the tolerant aegis of the stars and stripes, and they became truly and completely American.

In the West, where there was opportunity for all in the untilled fields, the unclaimed grasslands, the untapped mineral wealth under the ground, our native population was richly swelled by the Scandinavians, Poles, Russians, Spaniards, Englishmen, Frenchmen and nu-

(Continued on page 8)

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*Charles
Atlas*

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(Continued from page 6)

merous other foreign-born who followed in the wake of the trail-breakers. They had been nurtured under many and varied conditions, laws, and traditions, yet on the common meeting ground of the frontier, they had little trouble in working out their problems in a way that was acceptable to the decent, law-abiding majority. For there, they were *men*, first, and anything else they may have been was of secondary importance.

Self-respecting men of courage have a way of working things out. They see eye to eye. They drive to the point of a problem.

Many times, as in this war or in the primitive, wild days of the West's early settlements, the only direct solution to a problem is through violence. When a treacherous, ruthless nation or renegade band or a single criminally minded man attempts to ride roughshod over his peace-loving, less well armed neighbors, and when there is no established law that can stop him, violence must meet violence to restore order and decency.

It's happening today in Europe, Africa, and Asia. And it happened many times in the West that is portrayed in the stories of this magazine. Its rightness, its justice, is so apparent that no clear-thinking person questions it. Standing by itself, violence is deplorable; but when it is the only means by which a greater evil may be stamped out, the end justifies it.

Man has been coming up in the world in the last couple centuries. We Americans can be justly proud of our part in the historic cycle. Our democratic traditions, honoring the rights of common man, stem back to the winter of 1620, when a resolute little band of freedom-loving men and women pooled their destinies on the bleak Massachusetts slope overlooking Plymouth Rock.

The seeds they planted there were to grow and spread until, a little more than a hundred and fifty years later, a mighty, robust young nation came into being, dedicated to the revolutionary proposition that all men, created equal, are endowed by their Creator with the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Not without fighting and sacrifice and a

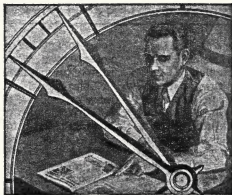
staunch, unbending faith did those early Americans win for us the blessings of a government designed to guard the rights of all men. And not without more fighting and more bloodshed, have we been able to preserve those rights to this day. Yet, in the hearts of men who have been allowed to think straight and independently, there is a common sense of justice so strong and so driving that the outcome of any cause they espouse is determined in advance. Wherever there is a pressing need and a reasonable singleness of purpose, as there is in today's war against a tyrannical aggressor or as there was in the young West's growing pains of civilization, there is little serious question as to ultimate victory.

Probably till the end of time we'll thrill to the stories of the men who risked their lives to win the human rights that we Americans have been enjoying for generations—and that all mankind is going to enjoy when this war is won. Today's heroes of the United Nations will take their place on humanity's honor roll, to enrich the legend and literature, common to all mankind, that will help bind future generations together in a single tradition and purpose.

For next month's *10 Story Western*, Tom Roan has written a novel of a Western gunman, a professional whose trigger-skill was for hire to the highest bidder, yet who had a deep sense of decency and justice. Rip Denson, whose exploits will be dramatized in "Cattle Pool Gunman" in the next issue, was feared and hated and wanted by the law, in that rough, tough country—but, more important, he was probably the only man in that part of the West who would have dared upset the apple cart of the boss-killer who ran things at the ugly little cowtown of Doom River. And, thereby, he earned his place among fiction's champions of human rights.

On the train, coming in to Doom River, he had been challenged by one of the boss-killer's other hirelings, a swaggering, bellicose hombre who had forced a fight, and Rip Denson had been obliged to kill the man. The boss-killer, Slick Ranlon, hadn't liked that. Nor had Denson intended that he should.

(Concluded on page 10)



How Do You Use The Most Important Hours of Your Day?

The most important—and they can be the most profitable, too. Men—ordinary men in ordinary circumstances—have had returns of as high as \$5, \$10, \$25, even in exceptional cases \$50 per hour for these hours.

They are the hours of your leisure time—usually spent in recreation or odds and ends.

These can be your growth hours, the time when through training you can prepare for more efficient service on the job or for the job ahead. During your working hours, you are usually buried in routine details, growing slowly if at all. But in these spare hours, your mind can reach out to absorb the experience of others, to learn the principles and methods behind your job and behind your field. The next day on the job, you will find yourself using something of what you learned the night before to the benefit of your job and the pleasure of your boss.

Interestingly enough, this spare time study can be fascinating recreation, not drudgery. And the few minutes spent this way tone up the remaining hours of your leisure

—make them more interesting.

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(Continued from page 8)

For it was clear to Rip Denson that he couldn't do business with Hanlon.

Denson hadn't been in town half an hour before he told Hanlon what he could do with the gun-job he'd been offered. He was in a ticklish spot, he knew, for Hanlon owned the town, from the sheriff's office down to the grimmest den of bushwhack murderers. And Denson had an idea Hanlon wouldn't be long in offering a nice piece of change for the death of Rip Denson.

But Denson was in no hurry to get out of town. He was standing on the street when a sandy-mustached rider came clattering in on a big, one-eyed buckskin. Here's the way Roan tells what happened:

The rider was a short, heavy-set man of sixty, wearing dusty gray range garb. Denson noticed him with special interest, for this was the first man he had seen in Doom River who was not packing a six-shooter.

"Hello, Chan Piper!" Two burly gunmen had come out of a saddle shop across the street. By the shiny star on the vest of the man who had called out, Denson knew him to be Slick Hanlon's sheriff, Rock Angel. He was about forty, big and dark, overdressed in black. Trailing him was a long-necked deputy.

"Coming in to trade?" The sheriff laughed as the rider pulled his buckskin to a halt. "Went home and had a good sulk. Now you're back. But if you're going to see Hanlon, I'll speak for him. Where's the cattle?"

"There's five hundred head." Chan Piper turned in his saddle and nodded back the way he had come. "Down on the river under the bluffs, my boys are holdin' 'em. All young beef stuff, Rock. Nobody in Devil Drum Valley ever saw any better. It's a shame for me to sell that fine stuff for ten dollars a head. My stars, everybody knows they'll bring Hanlon at least twenty-five."

"Hanlon's changed his mind since morning," the sheriff said. "You made him mad. But I was asked to make an offer—if you came back."

"My stars, Rock!" Chan Piper's face paled. "Now—now don't say he's

goin' to cut the price agin! I've got notes to meet, men to pay off! I just got to rake up five thousand dollars!"

"Then you'd better go back for some more cattle," the sheriff said. "Hanlon authorizes me to pay you exactly eight dollars a head for your young beef. You can take it or leave it."

"You say you've got good, young beef, mister?" Rip Denson had moved forward. "If you have I'll take 'em at ten dollars, and I'll split the big end of the difference with you in what we get when we sell."

"Look here, stranger!" The sheriff wheeled upon him. "You—you can't do this! Have—er—you got a license to buy cattle in my district?"

Denson grinned at him. "Any man has a right to go into the cattle business."

"You're trying to move damned fast in Doom River, Rip Denson!" The sheriff's hands were opening and closing, eager for the feel of the big black gun-butts at his hips.

"You trading with me, Mr. Piper?" Denson asked.

"Hell-fire, yes!" cried the man on the buckskin. "Yuh—yuh're just as good as savin' my life, mister!"

"He may have saved your life, Piper," the sheriff said, "but I wouldn't give fifteen cents worth of dog meat for his—or yours either now—after he's horned in on Walker P. Hanlon like this!"

Rip Denson was cutting himself a big slice of trouble when he took up the fight against the overbearing injustice that reigned in Doom River. But that's usually the way with a man who has the courage to take up the cudgel for the persecuted, the down-trodden.

When we honor the West and its traditions—and men like Rip Denson, who dared risk their lives for the things they knew to be right—we pay tribute to the long line of history's heroes, of every nationality and every generation, who have carried forward the cause of humanity—to the day of enlightenment when a true fellowship of man will rule the world.

THE EDITOR.

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CHAPTER ONE

Any Man's Fight

PERCHED on the front seat of a rattle-trap buckboard, Eldridge Henshaw knew he made a perfect target. There was a slight feeling of security in the weight of a good .45 Colt at either hip, but the best two-gunner in all

THE RANGE

By **TOM
ROAN**

Montana would have been no match for a sharpshooter rifleman hidden in the bushes waiting to make his kill.

Eldridge Henshaw did not like it worth a damn as he drove northward along the old trail under the cottonwoods on the west side of the river. His wiry body stiffened several times and became as straight as a gun-barrel while he kept a

tight rein on the two wall-eyed mean bays and watched the rocks and trees on the other side of the river.

If a sudden shot came it would probably be from the far side of the river. Sneak killers liked good places to hide, and always tried to find spots where a quick getaway could be made in case the first blast of gunfire failed to get their man.

He was down again, this time astride the end of the tongue.



With the old boss dead, there was nothing to keep Ridge Henshaw on the Circle Bar, and everything to drive him away—except the fright in a brave girl's eyes, the whistling challenge of bushwhack guns . . . and a cow-country fighting man's loyalty that carried beyond the grave!

Henshaw had been shot at four times in four weeks. Each time he had been caught out either with an infernal buckboard or a wagon. It was beginning to grind on his nerves. In addition he had had another row with Larch Harper. For three months now he had been convinced that he was going to have to kill the new half-owner of the Circle Bar. He had come within an inch of doing it this very morning at the breakfast table—and he might yet do it before the day was out if Larch Harper crowded him again with his nasty talk.

It was not right to send a man to Rebellion in a rattle-trap buckboard drawn by two half-broken brones to pick up a woman and her daughter. He had told Larch Harper that to his teeth across the table, and he could still see the man's big, cold, liver-lipped face smirking at him. Larch understood him perfectly. Every puncher at the Circle Bar knew that. It had been like two bad dogs bristling at each other since the day Larch had set foot on the ranch.

Eldridge Henshaw had punched cows for more than twenty years—ever since he had been big enough to climb a stirrup like a monkey and haul himself into a saddle. He had come to the Circle Bar almost as a kid. For seven years before the coming of Larch Harper he had worked the far-flung rangelands, getting along with most men.

Old Bluenose Bill Harper, the original owner of the Circle Bar, could not have treated him any decenter if Henshaw had been his son. It had been Henshaw who had held the old man's head in his lap when a hail of bullets from the bushes dropped him down on Wolf Creek. Bill Harper had tried to tell him something that seemed mighty important. Never got it out, Bill didn't—just lay there trying his best to talk with four balls of lead in his body and another mushrooming slug through the side of his face that had carried half his jaw away.

Eldridge Henshaw did not like to remember that bloody face and those desperate, sky-blue eyes looking up at him. When Henshaw closed his eyes he always caught himself trying to picture Bill's broad and ruddy face beside the fat, pasty-white face of Larch. Outside of being

about the same build, each with a big, round face, Larch was no more like Bill than a hog and a slide-saddle. They just didn't jibe—in looks, likes or dislikes. No man could have been better to a horse than Bill; and no man could be meaner to one than Larch.

There was the matter of laughing, too. Some men could laugh and everybody wanted to laugh with them. When Larch Harper laughed a man felt like killing him. It would not be hard to pump lead into Larch's belly when the right time came.



THE town of Rebellion held little to lift a man's spirits. It was sun-baked, flat, dry, a cluster of unpainted houses and shacks huddled together on either side of a dusty street just beyond the railroad bridge spanning the river. Forty rods of cattle pens stood between the boxcar depot and the river. Across the street behind the depot was the Cowboy's Friend, the worst dive in town. It was supposed to be a hotel as well as a saloon and a place where a man might dance for a quarter with one of Pink Lawley's paint-box critters in skirts.

Eldridge Henshaw did not like the Cowboy's Friend or anything pertaining to it, yet he drove his half-wild team on around behind it and tied the horses to stout iron rings in the rear wall of the building. The Westbound Overland would be coming within an hour. Meanwhile, another train, probably a freight, might come whistling through town, and he did not want those brones to see it and start tearing the devil out of the buckboard.

A woman poked her head out of a rear window, looking down at him quizzically as he stepped back from the horses. He glanced up at her and saw that she was a redhead, a new one in town, probably no better than the rest of the jennies Pink Lawley brought in to wheedle money out of half-drunk cowboys and cattlemen. She was a big, sloppy critter, only half-wrapped in a faded blue slip. Her hair looked as if calves had been chewing at it; a wad of it hung down over her right eye. Rouge from her lips had been smeared over the cheek not hidden by her

hair. Some fellow had been kissing her, he reckoned. His eyes glared back at her, gray, hard and earnestly speculative, for at least three seconds before she winked and spoke to him.

"Papa love mama, long boy?"

"I dunno." He scratched his chin thoughtfully, then his eyes brightened and the hint of a grin etched its way across his face. "I'm a cowpuncher, not a dairy han'."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothin'." He shrugged. "Just talkin' to be talkin', I reckon."

He started walking away, big Colt rocking at either hip on its heavy cart-ridge belt. Suddenly the air was filled with a fierce scream that startled the horses, and the redhead was cursing him at the top of her voice.

"You dirty dog!" she wailed. "You dirty louse, you would insult a lady! Come back here an' I'll knock your brains out with a slop jar an' hang it over your head, you good for nothin', sour-mouthed whiskey head!"

He grinned to himself and walked on.

It was the first time anybody, anywhere, had called him a whiskey head. But a man could not argue with a honkatonk woman unless he was in a notion to just forget himself and slap hell out of her to shut her mouth. Besides, he guessed he had it coming. He'd had no business saying what he did. Larch Harper would probably have stood there talking for an hour—unless he invited her down to have a drink with him. All the boys said Larch knew how to handle 'em.

Crossing the street, he headed for the east end of the depot, and climbed up to perch himself on the top rail of the nearest cattle pen. It was his usual place when he came to Rebellion and had to wait for the train, but he was nervous about it this morning. If the other half of the new owners of the Circle Bar turned out to be as mean as Larch he did not know what he was going to do about it. A man would not be able to fight a woman. The only thing he could do would be to pack up and get out. Larch would like that, but Henshaw would be damned if he was going to do it just to please him.

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Larch had made it plain from the start that he wanted to get rid of him. He did not have nerve enough to come right out and fire a man, but he was the kind who would nag a man to death. Of late he seemed to be pressing more and more to make everybody on the ranch up and leave it. The men would have gone long before if Henshaw had not held them.

There was something about the old Circle Bar that just would not let him leave it. Every blasted time he thought about it he imagined he could see Bluenose Bill lying there with his head in his lap trying to tell him something. It was a little crazy, something about a clock—a hell of a thing for a man to be thinking about when he was dying.

He was like a hawk on a limb, sitting there thinking about Larch, and constantly finding himself comparing the man to Bill. Old Bluenose Bill had been a cutter, all right. When the boys went anywhere for a little spree Bill was always with them, willing to drink them under the table if it took that much, and then pile them in their saddles and bring 'em back to the ranch like an old cat dragging in a litter of sick kittens that had been out in a cloudburst.

Noise lifted and fell behind him in the Cowboy's Friend, but he took no stock of it until a harsh ring of booted heels thumping across the street caught his ear. He turned his head casually, and saw a big, black-bearded man heading toward him. The man was evidently a stranger in town, and one glance at his bloodshot black eyes told Henshaw he was looking for trouble.

"Crawl down!" ordered the man when he came up. "I've heard a lot about yuh, Ridge Henshaw. I'm told that yuh think yuh're a purty damn tough hombre. My name's Kelky—Steve Kelky, if it means anything to yuh."

"It maybe don't." Henshaw's long legs extended as he dropped quietly off his perch. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw a gang of men and women lining up in front of the Cowboy's Friend. "What's yore trouble?"

"The man ain't born who can insult a woman of mine!" Kelky had stopped eight feet away, wide-legged, with the thumbs of his hairy-backed hands hooked

over the broad buckles of heavy gunbelts. "Yuh insulted Queenie O'Reilly! She's a lady—"

"Oh?" Henshaw's eyes widened. "A lady in that dump?" He jerked a thumb toward the Cowboy's Friend. "Didn't know Pink had such things. Thought Pink only slopped hogs in his place. Fact is—" his eyes hardened "—I know that to be true."

"Yuh're a damned liar!"

"Yuh ready to prove it?"

"I'm here to prove it!" snarled Kelky. "What're yuh goin' to do about it?"

"Just knock hell out of yuh—unless yuh go for a gun."



IT WAS a quiet, matter-of-fact answer to a question, but the action that followed was not quiet. Eldridge Henshaw's long legs carried him forward with two quick paces. Kelky threw up his hands and they became dark mauls of poised fists as his body buckled forward. "I'm a prize fighter!" he snarled. "Does me good to—"

The rest was never finished. A right fist, hard as a knot, drove through Kelky's guard. There was a sickening smash as it landed flat on the man's nose and mouth. A left followed the right, smacking like a breaking board on the man's jaw. Kelky reeled backward, trying to recover. His right foot turned in the gravel. Blurting out an oath, he went down, sprawling backward. The back of his head struck one of the steel rails of the track. With a groan the man rolled over, as limp as a dead fish on the cinder-covered ground.

A scream now came from across the street. Henshaw turned to look, and his jaw sagged open with amazement. It was the redhead again. She was coming forward at a rush, the loose blue wrapper blaring open, naked skin glistening in the strong sunlight. Behind her, like wolves bringing up the rear, were a dozen toughs.

"You dirty cowboy dog!" she screamed. "You've killed my man—an' now I'll scratch your eyes out! Come on, men!"

There followed the damndest free-for-all fight a man had ever seen. When the Westbound Overland rolled in, with the

engine's bell clanging, the engineer staring pop-eyed, the air brakes hissing, there was blood up and down the cindered platform. Five men lay on the ground with faces that looked as if mules had kicked them.

Mr. Eldridge Henshaw still had his hands full, but Queenie O'Reilly was the worst of the whole mess. She was like a feist pup snapping at the heels and face of a long, lean greyhound while the rest of the pack tried to close in. Henshaw had been pushing her away from him the best he could. In the fighting swarm Queenie had lost most of her wrapper, and a gang of other scantily-dressed hussies from the Cowboy's Friend had come forward to mount the fence and cheer her into further effort in her wild battle over her man.

At the sight of passengers poking their heads out of the windows of the coaches the cheering of the women on the fence grew louder. Henshaw knocked a man sprawling, kicked another in the belly, and brought his six-shooter smashing down on the head of a third who reached for a Colt to make a quick end of it. The other men who had joined the fight suddenly turned and fled, leaving only the shrieking Queenie to carry on.

Eldridge Henshaw simply had to end this thing. He caught the near-naked Queenie in his arms, lifted her, spinning her above his head, and shoved her head-first into the nearest rain-barrel at the corner of the depot. When he dragged her out of the water and gave her a shove toward the cattle pen all the fight was gone out of her.

He felt like a fool as he turned, looking at all those gawking faces poked out the windows of the coaches. Seven men lay there on the ground. Blood was seeping from the side of his own mouth and his nose, and people were laughing at him and hollering their heads off from the coaches.

Any man would have been thankful that the Overland had a schedule to keep. Henshaw felt about the size of a grasshopper as the train pulled away, with passengers still hollering and laughing at him, but the worst was yet to come.

A horrified woman and a girl with a pile of luggage half-thrown around them stood on the platform staring at him.

They were both tall, one about forty-five, the other around twenty, each dressed in dark gray. The woman was black-haired, with a rather stout build. The girl had light hair and smooth, creamy skin.

Those two, he reckoned, would have to be Mrs. Frances Harper and her daughter. Hell, they *had* to be—nobody else had got off the Overland!

CHAPTER TWO

Lead Flies

HE HAD to face them. No other way out of it. He felt as skittish as an unbroken bronc seeing a puffing railroad engine for the first time, but there was no one else to do this job.

He turned and looked at the men still sprawled on the cinders. Not a pretty sight for tenderfeet women. Seven of those plug-uglies were still there. Somebody had dragged Steve Kelky back from the tracks in time to keep the Overland from cutting his head off. His Queenie O'Reilly and the brazenly squawking gang of half-dressed human magpies on the fence had disappeared.

Taking a deep breath, Henshaw walked over to the rain barrel where he had cooled off the raging Queenie. Scooping up water that was half-filled with wiggle-tails, he got the blood off his hands and face, and then moved forward, using his big neckerchief for a towel. He was about as awkward as a mule when he raked off his hat and bowed low to the two newcomers.

"Yuh ladies, I take it," he said, "are bound for the Circle Bar?"

"We were!" answered the older woman, drawing herself up as stiff as a poker. "Are you one of Mr. Larchmont Harper's cow servants?"

"Cowboys, mother!" corrected the younger critter. "*Cowboys.*"

"Both, I reckon—" Henshaw was doing his damndest to smile—"mean the same, though I don't follow Larch's four-legged critters around with a hippin' satchel. I've got the buckboard over yonder behind the Cowboy's Friend. It'll take no time a-tall to fetch it."

That much being over, he turned on his heel, glad to get away from Frances Harper's hard, withering stare. A glance

showed him that two of the men he had hit were stirring back to consciousness. Unless they were plain damn fools they would not try getting up to shoot him in the back. Most people in these parts did not try that with Eldridge Henshaw. They were afraid they might miss—and if a man missed when he cut down at close shooting range with Eldridge Henshaw, then that hombre was a dead gander.

But he was scared when he rounded the rear corner of the Cowboy's Friend—scared that the confounded redhead might show up again. If she did he did not know what he was going to do, with no more rain barrels handy. They were all a pain, women were—like horses that had been eating loco weed. A man never knew what they would do.

He untied the team, keeping one wary eye on the back door of the saloon and the other on the window above him. At any moment a huge white water pitcher or a slop jar might come sailing down on a man's head. A deep feeling of relief came to him when he climbed into the seat of the buckboard. He could hear Queenie O'Reilly cursing him at the bar and trying to get somebody else to come out and fight him.

When he drove to the depot he eased down with care. For safety's sake, he tied the half-broken broncs to a stout corner post of the cattle pen with their strong halter shanks, to make certain they would stay there long enough for him to load the baggage and get the woman and girl into the rear seat.

"We won't be long gettin' out to the place," he told them, doing his best to avoid the older woman's stare. "This team knocks along right well."

Neither of the critters answered him. In a way he was glad of it. It saved a lot of fool talk, but it was unavoidable that he should catch a glimpse of their faces when he was helping them into the rear seat. For one split-second his eyes met the girl's eyes. They were deep, pretty and blue—eyes that would sort of grab onto a man for some reason and hold him like a calf snubbed to a post, and in them there was an impish flicker that made him feel that she was laughing at him.

"Don't go to hollerin' if they start shootin' back there," he warned as he

climbed into his seat. "These broncs are plumb fractious. I wouldn't of brought 'em, nor this rig either, but the gentle stock somehow got out of the corral durin' the night, an' Larch painted the other buckboard yesterday. It wasn't dry this mornin'."

It was apology enough, he guessed. He did not need to tell them he suspected Larch of slipping the gentle horses out of the corral after deliberately painting the good buckboard so that it would be sticky when morning came.



HENSHAW was relieved when he swung away to go rattling out of town with the dust trailing up behind him. Twice relieved, he reckoned. Neither the girl nor the woman had answered him, and no fool started shooting off his .45 in front of the Cowboy's Friend to scare the broncs.

Maybe they were keeping quiet out of respect for Larch. Of late Larch had been quite a regular customer at the Cowboy's Friend. He often rode to Rebellion during the afternoon and did not come back until the wee hours of morning, and sometimes he was as drunk as a fiddler's hussy and slept most of the day like an old tomcat that had been out on an all-night prow.

"Are you Ridge Henshaw?" The woman spoke, and he winced as if she had slapped him on the back of the neck.

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded, keeping his eyes on the horses. "My name's Eldridge. Bluenose—er—I mean Bill used to call me Ridge. Fact is, most of the boys do."

"I've heard a lot about you." The woman's voice was still hard and flat. "William Harper mentioned you a number of times in his letters."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded again, felt a lump in his throat, and swallowed it down. "We was right good friends."

That was plenty true, of course, but he wondered what Bluenose Bill Harper had said about him in his letters. This woman was the wife of Tom Harper, Bill's long-dead brother. The old man had written to her regularly, at least once a month, and Henshaw had never seen him seal an envelope without a check in it drawn on the bank in Helena where Bill kept his

money. In all the years he had been at the Circle Bar he had never known Bill to write to his brother Larch more than three times.

"Mr. Henshaw—" he could sense the woman leaning forward in the rear seat—"does Larchmont drink like William?"

"Why—why, no, I reckon not." His voice blundered, giving him away. Lying was not part of Eldridge Henshaw. He always made a mess of it when he tried. "That is, ma'am, he don't drink nothin' to speak of—maybe a dram or two now an' then."

"Oh, I see!"

He did not like that "Oh, I see!" business worth a toot. Wished she would keep her mouth shut. It always made him mad as hell when people started questioning him, especially women. They never knew when to stop, just gouged in on a man, one question popping behind another. A man could stop a man if he had to warp him over the head with a .45, but a woman—never!

"Are you a drinking man, Mr. Henshaw?"

"No!"

"Do you gamble?"

"No!"

"Do you smoke?"

"Sometimes."

"Oh, I see!" There was a tense, brief silence. Then: "Why do you carry those horrible pistols?"

"Why?" His eyes were like bullets as he tried to keep them staring at the ears of the trotting broncs. "Well—well, I reckon, ma'am, there's rattlesnakes in this country."

"Rattlesnakes!"

"Yes'm," he nodded grimly, wishing to hell she had remained in Ohio. "Rattlesnakes, grizzly bears, toad frogs, whip-poor-wills, mountain lion, katydids, an' doodle bugs. They're mighty bad out here at times, ma'am."

"And red-haired women, too, I suppose?" It was like whamming a mean bronc over the head with a halter when she landed that one on him. "And men lying sprawled over a depot platform, a cow servant jugging a woman up and down headfirst in a barrel filled with horribly impure water. Mr. Henshaw—" she was leaning forward; words hard as crack-

ing ice—"do you always pick near-naked women to fight with?"

He did not have a chance to answer her. They were now about three miles below Rebellion. The broncs were clicking along at a faster pace than he wanted them to travel. He started to turn in the seat, but the sudden crash of a rifle across the river changed his mind.

A bullet struck the wooden dashboard with a murderous *whang!* Splinters flew from the hard-seasoned old hickory, showering like needles against the rumps of the horses. Both the crazy brutes lunged forward at the same instant. At the same time there was another long, rolling crash of sound from across the river, then another and another as the snorting horses, bucking like hell in the harness, lunged forward in a wild runaway.

CHAPTER THREE

Cold Nerve Needed

IT WAS no surprise when the girl did not scream. For some reason Eldridge Henshaw had had an idea from the first that she would be a cool head in a quick blast of trouble. The surprise came when he heard no screeching and carrying-on from Frances Harper. Women of her type usually raised the very devil. Once scared, their nerves went to thunder. A man could hear them screaming a mile away, but not a sound came from the back seat now.

Eldridge Henshaw was too busy to bother about anything but the horses for the next mile. He sawed on the lines, trying to keep the running broncs in the crooked trail instead of swinging madly out into the rocks and brush to smash everything to splinters. At any moment an axle might crack like a stick of chalk or one of the old wheels might let go, the spokes cracking and flying out of it, the iron tire warping off, and one side of the buckboard coming down with a splintering crash.

Then the heavy lines suddenly broke, snapping off short at the rings of the bits and coming back like striking snakes slashing through the air. It was as if something had struck him. He went smashing back against the back-rest of the

seat. The old wood snapped. For a moment he was sprawled there, booted and spurred heels in the air. The woman and girl threw their hands against him, giving him an upward push that helped to right him.

"Hang on!" he yelled. "Hang on! *Don't jump!*"

Holding to the dashboard, he worked himself forward and down on the double-trees. It was like going down between two bounding and lunging monsters as he started working his way out on the lurching, bobbing tongue of the buckboard. The broncs resented the touch of a man's hand on them, and even at a run they started to buck and kick in the harness.

Once the long tongue seemed to jerk from under his feet. One foot went down in the dust. His hands clawed desperately for something by which he could drag himself up. In a couple of seconds he had a firmer grip on the harness, but those two seconds were like long minutes.

He was down again, this time astride the end of the tongue, when he was able to reach the heads of the horses and work his hands from the throat latches of the bridles to the bits. For five hundred yards after that it was a fight to saw the wild devils down and finally bring them to a stumbling, fighting halt. Able now to look back at the buckboard, he could see through the blinding dust that the woman and girl were still there, holding like grim death to the seat and trying to catch their breaths.

"Well—well!" The woman was the first to recover herself enough to speak. "God help us if all Montana is like this! I was never so scared in my life!"

"I'm plumb sorry, ma'am." He had slid down to the ground and was in front of the horses, holding them by the bits in a steel-like grip. "I did the best I could."

"It was splendid, Mr. Henshaw!" the girl gasped. "Was it those shots that we heard that made them run like that?"

"Yes, Miss Harper, I guess it was them." He looked narrowly back at the long line of dust clouds up the river. It was evident that neither the girl nor the woman yet knew that somebody had been shooting at them, and he did not intend to enlighten them. "Some hunter over there, I reckon, shootin' at a deer. Would

it be askin' too much, ma'am, for yuh to sorter hop down an' help me a little?"

"Not at all!"

The girl was leaving the seat as she spoke. She dropped to the ground and came forward. At once he saw that she knew more about horses and harness than he had suspected. He did not need to tell her that he was afraid to let go of the bits for a second. Seizing the broken ends of the reins, she brought them through their proper rings on the hames.

He squinted at the end of each rein as he again made it fast to the bit rings. Once, catching his chance, he dabbed one of the broken ends to his tongue, and a mean glint filled his eyes when the taste of the leather stung his tongue with an acrid little stab.

Somebody had tried to do him dirt again. He knew acid when he tasted it. Somebody had carefully dropped acid on the ends of those lines to make them break!



THE girl stood in front of the team when he took the mended lines and climbed cautiously back to the broken front seat. He had watched every move she had made, and every move had told him things about her. She was no greenhorn. She was not afraid of the broncs. Not by a damned sight! She was talking to them, gently rubbing their mean muzzles. At first they resented it, backing their ears and champing their bits as if they would rather bite her hands off than to have them touch them.

Even when he was back on the seat he had to wait a minute for the girl. She was talking baby-talk to those half-crazy broncs, still petting them, still gently stroking their muzzles. The danged fools were liking it, too, before she moved quietly away. When she reached the left front wheel of the buckboard she gave Henshaw another silent accounting of herself. One foot went to the hub of the wheel. Hand on the seat, she swung up beside him.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Why—why, no, ma'am!" He grinned, knowing that his face was as red as a woodpecker's head. "It's as safe here as

behind, I reckon. Where did yuh learn about horses, Miss Harper?"

"I read about them," she laughed. "In the paper!"

"Well, all right," he said. "Whoever writ the paper knew what he was writin' about. Only, I'd say—" he frowned, allowing the horses to move forward slowly—"there's some things that yuh just can't put to paper. A horse is one of 'em. To know 'im yuh've got to eat with 'im, sleep with 'im. A heap of times yuh've got to come right down to earth an' live like he lives, think like he thinks, an' even act like he acts."

"Yes, ma'am, it's true. Horses know who likes 'em an' who don't. They know when they can bluff yuh an' when they can't. Don't make no difference to them what kind of clothes yuh wear—or whether yuh're a good man, bad or medium. They're in my line, ma'am, like the water I drink when I'm dry. I love horses, an' I love folks—"

He caught himself, left it unfinished. He became silent, almost sullen after that. Running off at the mouth like a gabbing fool! He had even forgotten Frances Harper sitting back there listening to every word he was saying.

Behind, back there in the rocks and trees on the other side of the river, his would-be killers had tried and failed again. They would go sneaking away like wolves, waiting for another chance, but they were getting pretty desperate, he guessed, when they would crack down on a man with two women.

Then there were those lines, burned with acid. Larch Harper's fat face appeared to float in front of him when he

thought about that. Only a fool would stay at a place after that. For a few moments he thought he had made up his mind. He would deliver Frances Harper and her daughter to the Circle Bar, then he would saddle up his tall, silver-maned Black Bugle, and ride off, leaving the whole show to Larch and these two critters from Ohio. But dust blew in his face. He closed his eyes for a moment, and seemed to see Bluenose Bill staring at him, trying to tell him something.

"I ain't a quitter," he growled in a whisper.

"Did you say something, Mr. Henshaw?" The girl looked at him quickly, startling him.

"Why—why, no, I reckon not." He tried to grin, feeling his face change color. "I'm just sorter bad at talkin' to myself now an' then, Miss Harper."

"That's a terribly bad sign, Mr. Henshaw." Frances Harper was suddenly coming to life, to put her oar in again. "They tell me it's the first sign of insanity."

"Maybe it is!" he shot back at her. "I figure most anybody's crazy as hell to monkey around the Circle Bar since Bluenose Bill Harper got shot."

"Who shot him?"

"I don't know." He scowled. "If I did the bird who done it would already be dead."

"You wouldn't kill a man!"

"No!" he snapped. "If I knew the man who killed Bluenose Bill I'd just stave a couple of balls of lead in his belly an' let the wind freeze 'im to death blowin' through the air-holes!"

She let him alone after that, and he



drove on in his glum silence until they mounted a tall rise. Ahead of them now, miles away yet, was the Circle Bar on a great flat stretching westward from the river. Perched on the cool side of the porch—in a fancy chair he had “ordered off for”—would be Larch Harper with a bottle of whiskey and some of his soda water fixings on a little table beside him.

“That,” announced Henshaw, lifting his hand to point, “is it.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Boss of the Circle Bar

LARCH HARPER was there, all right, neatly encased in a blazing red silk shirt, fancy gunbelts and tight doekin trousers. He was on the east side of the great porch facing the high drop-off to rocks at the river's edge. His big figure lay at perfect ease in a Chinese blue chaise lounge. His whiskey table stood at his right, covered with fancy bottles and glasses. His fine black boots shone like mirrors. For such a big man he could look fairly good at times, especially with his long, gray-streaked black hair carefully combed and brushed back behind his ears.

“They're here,” Henshaw announced bluntly as he drove up and sawed the brones to a halt alongside the porch. “Yuh can help 'em down an' take out the luggage, I reckon. These brones may bolt ag'in if I ease up on 'em.”

Harper was already on his feet and pulling on his huge white hat. He could be a regular gentleman fella when he wanted to. Coming forward, smiling all over his fat face, now close-scraped with a razor and carefully powdered, one would have thought for the minute that it was the happiest time of his life.

“Frances!” he cried. “And Zelda! My, my, how that darling young lady of yours has grown, Frances. Beautiful as you, just as I always knew she would be! Forgive me for not coming to meet you myself.” He was not giving either the woman or the girl a chance to get in a word edgewise. “There's so much work on a ranch the boss can never find time to get away. Not for an hour!”

That was a lie Larch could have kept from telling. Henshaw's face became a

little more sour, but he kept his mouth shut. He sat there, grim and straight, still holding tight lines on the brones. Out of the corners of his eyes he watched Larch help Frances Harper down from the rear seat. The girl swung down quickly over the front wheel.

“All right, drive on, Ridge.” Larch waved a big, authoritative hand. “You can unhitch the team and carry the baggage back to the house. Hurry up with it.”

“I ain't packin' baggage, Larch,” Henshaw's voice was flat, hard as a hammer on a nail. “I've been asked once today if I'm a cow servant. I reckon I'm that, but I ain't a lady's maid when stuff's right here that can be lifted from the rig to the porch. Call out yore new Jap cook if it's too much for yuh to handle.”

“Nice people!” Larch grinned all over his face as he winked at the woman and jabbed his thumb at Henshaw. “Uppity, you might say, eh, Frances?”

“Only, Larch, when I'm 'round my betters!” sneered Henshaw.

“I'll take care of the baggage.” It was the girl who volunteered that. “Those horses are dangerous, Uncle Larchmont. They ran away with us on the trail.”

“Henshaw's better in the saddle than a driver's seat.” Larch was still grinning. “No offense, Ridge!” He added that quickly. “Most plain bronco busters and cowboys are like that.”

“That's a fact, Larch.” Henshaw nodded, still trying to keep a firm grip on his temper. “A twenty-horse freighter team's about my limit when it comes to skinnin' over rough country, though I have driv' thirty head over Utah Pass an' through the Hell With The Lights Out Country. They were broke, though, an' I had no women aboard.”

He drove away as quickly as he could. At the corral he unhitched, unharnessed, and turned the horses in to a big haystack. Larch, the woman and the girl were still on the porch. Toto, the Circle Bar's new cook, had come out to take charge of the baggage. Henshaw had never liked that grinning, bobbing monk with his short-clipped hair, his bullet head and big teeth. Larch had brought him along with him when he came to the ranch. Old Wing Toy, the Chinaman who had been with them for years, had taken the hint to pack

up and get out. No man on the ranch had liked that, and Bluenose Bill would never have stood for it.

Henshaw turned, looking down the river for three hundred yards to another little level-topped flat on the rise. A white fence up there marked the Circle Bar's graveyard. Bill's body lay there beside his wife, a daughter who had died of pneumonia at twelve, and a son who had been kicked and trampled to death under a mean horse.



MADE a man feel bad to look at that graveyard, then turn and listen to Larch Harper laughing and talking on the porch. But Henshaw did not want to dwell on that. He was hungry, and it was well beyond eating time. He returned to the house by the back way.

At the old pump on the rear porch he washed his hands and face. He had barked a couple of knuckles in the fight in Rebellion, and a gander at himself in the old mirror on the wall showed that one side of his mouth was swollen, making him look as if a bumblebee had stung him. That was all right, he reckoned, as he turned and walked to the kitchen door. Hell, he had never taken any beauty prizes!

"Gimme a couple of thick slices of meat between two slabs of bread," he ordered, seeing Toto at the stove. "I'll eat outside just for a change."

"Yeesh-sha!" hissed the cook, cropped head bobbing, big teeth glinting in a smile. "Yeesh-sha!"

He heard Larch calling him when he took his sandwich and strode down to the bunkhouse, but he did not answer. Eating at the table with Larch was always hair-triggered business. He did not want to be prodded, with women at the table.

His Winchester hung above his bunk in the corner near the big oak table where he kept the tally books. Finishing his sandwich, he took down the rifle, shoved open the loading lever to make sure it was still filled with cartridges, and walked out to the corrals with the gun slung across his left arm. Nobody from now on would find him anywhere without a rifle.

He'd been plumb foolish, he guessed, for not dropping it in the buckboard when he started out for Rebellion. But if he had done that he would have had to carry it over to the depot to keep somebody from stealing it when his back was turned, and he had figured that he would look formidable enough with a pair of .45's sawed around him.

Black Bugle whistled at him from an upper corral when he entered the long shed where his saddle was hanging on its peg. There was no better looking horse in Montana. Blacker than midnight an' taller than a star, that fella! Only his mane was white, a silver banner always blowing in the wind—a long horse, beautifully put together, as sure of foot as a lizard, and sounder than a dollar! Henshaw took down his saddle, swung it over his shoulder, and headed for the corral. Just inside the big gate he halted, eyes widening, the saddle slipping from his shoulder and falling to the ground.

Something was wrong. Black Bugle was always there at the gate to meet him. The horse now stood in the center of the corral, looking at him wall-eyed. His head was up, mane curling in the wind lifting up the valley. Henshaw stood his rifle against the gatepost, and walked forward, eyes narrow. The horse stamped his forefeet and snorted.

"Come, Bugle!" Twenty feet away, Henshaw stopped, face a hardening mask of mounting fury. "Come here!" He thrust out his hand. "Come, boy! What ails yuh?"

The horse snorted, looked like he was going to wheel away, and then slung his head angrily. Henshaw walked on. The horse wheeled, turning his heels to him. Still Henshaw walked on, straight up to those dangerous heels. The horse kept his ears back, slinging his head. Henshaw thrust his hand between the black's hind legs and patted him, something no man on the ranch would have done for a thousand dollars gold.

"Come here," he ordered, voice trembling with anger. "Since when do yuh turn yore heels to me?"

Black Bugle wheeled. It would have been startling to anyone else. He was quicker than a flash. Head down, he seemed to lunge. Henshaw simply pushed

out his arms. Black Bugle thrust his head into them. Man and horse stood there.

"Now, son, now." Henshaw's voice was gentle, but it was trembling. A look of agony was in his face. Those who did not know Ridge Henshaw would have sworn that he was trying to keep from crying. "I know, son. I see. May God have mercy on the man who's been mistreatin' yuh!"

He turned, eyes still two cocked guns of damnation ready to explode. The horse followed him as if trying to hug close to him as he headed back for the gate.

CHAPTER FIVE

To Kill a Man

STRAIGHT on, saddle forgotten in the dust behind him, Winchester leaning against the gatepost, Henshaw headed back through the shed. Black Bugle, as nervous as a beaten dog, kept his head within an inch of his shoulder. They headed for the back porch, with Henshaw walking as straight as a ramrod. He heard Larch Harper laughing inside.

"Baptising a naked woman in a barrel!" the man was *haw-haw-ing*. "Oh, that's Ridge! The boys all call him that. When he's mad they call him Rip—Rip Henshaw!" Again there was a burst of wild laughter. "My best man, however. Bill knew a thing or two about men when he hired him. Ridge has killed a dozen men, they tell me—and the chances are that he shot some of those you saw lying on the platform. I wouldn't put anything past him when he's mad."

"I like Ridge Henshaw, Uncle Larchmont." That was Zelda Harper taking his part. "I simply can't believe all these things you say about him. If they're true—well, the shootings must have been two-sided affairs."

"Under his spell already!" Larch laughed again—that ugly, grating snort that made a man want to start shoving lead in his belly. "It's to be expected. All the women fall under his spell when Ridge shows up with his big guns at his hips and that wise-goose look in his eye."

"Yuh're a liar, Larch!" Henshaw had reached the doorway, getting there across the porch as noiselessly as a shadow. He stood there, hat slouched down over one

eye, legs as stiff as stilts driven into the floor, and Black Bugle waiting for him at the edge of the porch. "Women ain't in my line, an' yuh know it. The truth hurts men like yuh. But I didn't come for that." He shook back his shoulders. "Who's been whippin' Black Bugle?"

"I intended to tell you about that, Ridge." Harper slid his chair around cautiously from the head of the table and held up a big hand. "Take it easy now. Remember we have women here—"

"Who whipped 'im, Larch?"

"Easy, Henshaw, easy." The big hand was still up. "I want no killing. You've killed enough men—"

"Who done it, Larch?"

"Suppose I refuse to tell you?"

"Then—" a cruel smile moved Henshaw's lips, giving the lie to the whisper softness of his voice. "—I'll shoot yuh settin' right there in that chair. I'll blow that damned Jap down, too, if he don't quit monkeyin' with that fire poker like he wants to throw it at me. Come clean!" His voice lifted, jarring the room. "Who beat Black Bugle an' left all them welts on 'im!"

"All right, you asked for it!" snarled Harper. "I didn't do it, though you know I hate the sight of the black devil."

"Yeah," nodded Henshaw, "that's a fact, but only since I refused to sell 'im to yuh. Go on an' get it out! Yuh ain't swallowed an axe-handle, have yuh?"

"In your official capacity as cow boss," leered Harper, "a job I have never removed you from, out of respect for my dead brother, you hired the Big Hat Kid, the buck-toothed fool from Idaho. This morning, as you know, he complained of being sick at his stomach and didn't go out with the rest of the boys. I saddled my Yellow Lightning and rode across the river as usual for a little exercise. When I came back the Big Hat Kid had Black Bugle snubbed to a post out there in the big corral and was beating him with a rope. He had saddled the horse and tried to ride him. Black Bugle had thrown both Big Hat and the saddle. The Kid went crazy, I guess."

"So, so?" whispered Henshaw, eyes slowly widening. "An' where's the Kid now, Larch?"

"I told him what would happen when

you got back. He saddled the old string-haltered claybank he came here on, and I sent him up to the head of Sink Hole Canyon. I told him, Ridge—"Harper's eyes grew narrow"—to stay there. I told him I would try to talk to you and pump some sense into your quick head, but I also told him to look out for you and take to the timber like a wolf if he saw you coming."

"Yuh tellin' me the truth, Larch?"

"Ask the Big Hat Kid!" Harper shrugged and turned back to the table. "Ask Toto. He was here. You don't think Toto did it, do you?"

"No, I wouldn't say he did. That Jap couldn't ride in a coffin with the lid nailed down."



HENSHAW turned, feeling limp, and walked back off the porch with his horse following him. It was true that he had hired the Kid. It was true also that the Kid was a chance-taking little devil. He had expressed a desire several times to ride Black Bugle, and had twice made Henshaw mad on the subject.

"An' he might have tried." Henshaw admitted that to himself as he reached the corral gate and turned to look back at the house. "Still, if that underbaked lump of sourdough's lyin', I'll make 'im chaw lead. God, how I wish yuh could talk, Bugle!"

He walked on, back to the corral where he had left his saddle and rifle. He was cooler now. Too cool, he reckoned. Ice seemed to be gathering in his blood, and when he felt like that he was in his most dangerous mood. He looked at Black Bugle's back. There were no welts up there, and it looked as if the horse had been whipped with a saddle on. But he could not be certain.

"Yuh ain't hurt too bad to ride, son," he told the horse as he slipped the saddle on him. "Yuh'll feel better out with me, anyhow, than stayin' here without me."

Rifle hung on his saddle, his long reins dropped loosely over his left forearm, he headed back through the shed. In the center of it he met Zelda Harper.

"I'm sorry about your horse being whipped, Rip!"

"Yeah?" He halted stiff-legged again. "Well, that's right white of yuh, ma'am, an' I know Bugle would appreciate it if he understood what yuh've said. For all I know he maybe does. He ain't snortin' an' actin' like he don't want yuh around 'im. But—but why do yuh start callin' me Rip?"

"Because—I like it." She smiled at him half-heartedly. "Uncle Larchmont says they call you that when you're mad. It's like you, mad or not mad—Rip. You're a wind-cutter, a wind-burner. Uncle Bill often wrote about you as Rip Henshaw. I thought you were much older than you are."

"I'm twenty-eight, come next spring, ma'am." He tried to grin. "Some say I look a heap older'n that. But—" he nervously took his reins off his arm—"I've got things to do. I'm still a workin' man for the Circle Bar, I reckon."

"Yes, I know, Rip." She came closer and put her hand on his arm. "But—but don't go anywhere just now. Let me help you, Rip. *Please!* And—and don't think I'm silly! Honest, I'm not. Uncle Bill was always my choice—as far back as I can remember he was that; and he was so fond of you. Every letter he wrote said that. We really know very little about Uncle Larchmont."

"Bill was white, ma'am." He turned, scratched his chin nervously, and glanced toward the Circle Bar's little graveyard. "I loved 'im like a daddy. Fact is, I guess he's about all I ever knew of a daddy. Mine was shot in Texas when I was four—a Ranger, he was—an' my mother went when I was eight. Bill sorter took me under his wing." He managed a small, short laugh. "He's buried up yonder, ma'am. I used to think I'd sometime be planted up there, too. A good many fellas are up there who used to ride for Bill. He made all their coffins out yonder in the blacksmith shop."

"Yes, I know." Her hand tightened on his arm. "Unsaddle Black Bugle, Rip."

"Why, no, ma'am." He stepped back from her. "Yuh see, there's work to do. I aim to do it."

"Please, Rip!"

"Don't soft-talk to me like that, ma'am." His big hands lifted, quick as triggers, and were suddenly on her shoulders, eyes

boring into her eyes. "I ain't used to it."

"You're not going to work, Rip." Her voice was cool and level. "The Old Rip is riding now. The Old Rip with the devil in his blood! You're riding out of here to kill a man, Rip Henshaw."

"I ain't so shore of that, ma'am." He was backing away from her, and Black Bugle was backing with him. "Before I'm done I may have to come back here an' kill the man who whipped my horse."

CHAPTER SIX

Death Bait a Bushwack Trap

HE GOT away as quickly as he could. He was a little raw about it, he reckoned, but women could not understand everything. She had hurt him, too. He was not going to forget the way she had looked at him when he swung into the saddle to ride out the back way. That girl was scared of something, and she was not the kind to get scared easily. She stood there, her hands knotted, a look of desperation in her face. She reminded him of Bill, that time when Bill's pet horse was shot from under him in a rustler jam high up on the slopes of the Devil Winds—tough Old Bluenose Bill, sitting there on the high slope above the timberline, with a dying horse's head in his lap; big tears rolling down his cheeks, his lips quivering. That girl had tears in her eyes when Henshaw rode off and left her.

What the hell could a girl be afraid of around here? It was a mighty rare thing when a woman got shot in Montana. Men did not do those things—unless, of course, it was an accident or a man turned crazy and just had to shoot somebody.

Maybe he was going crazy as a barbwire fence. He kept thinking of that as he headed down across the ford, then into the rimrocks and brush on the east side of the river. Bluenose Bill was riding hard on his mind today, and the girl sure reminded him a heap of the old man, and yet she did not look like Bill, except for the eyes. She had his eyes, not so washed-out and faded, but Bill's just the same—a big, wide-open way of looking up at a man. And her lips had quivered like Bill's that day on the Devil Winds.

For three nights in a row he had

dreamed of Bill. In one dream it had been so real he could have sworn that Bill's ghost had come back to him, seeking him out in the bunkhouse to stand beside his bed and look at him. Bill had looked at him intently, mouth open, trying to tell him something—maybe about that damned clock he seemed so worried about when he was dying.

There was nothing in the big old hand-carved clock on the broad-log mantel above the Circle Bar's huge fireplace in the living room. Henshaw had looked into it a dozen times. He had lifted it up to look under it, had turned it around to scan its back.

Maybe, he had reasoned, Bill wanted to tell him he could have the clock because he had always admired it so much. It told a man everything, the hour of the day, the minute, the second; it told a man the day, the month, and whether it was going to rain, shine, blow or snow tomorrow. A clock like that gave a man a lot to think about—standing in front of it, wondering how many, many guts it had in it to tell a man so many, many things.

But the Big Hat Kid was on his mind now. It was hard for him to believe the Kid had beat up a horse like this. There were welts and small cuts all over Black Bugle's sides, hips and shoulders. His head had come in for a terrible beating, too. His left eye was almost closed.

It was only of late that the Kid had started acting up. Once or twice Henshaw would have let him go if it had not been for Larch Harper. Larch had been taking the Kid to Rebellion with him, and the Kid had started drinking a lot and fooling away time with the women in the Cowboy's Friend. Henshaw had not wanted to blurt it out to Larch there at the table that the Kid had been drunk last night and still unable to sit a saddle when dawn came. Larch knew that without a man having to tell him. Larch had been the one who had poured the Kid full of whiskey last night in the big living room.

Heading straight for Sink Hole Canyon, he rode into it a couple of miles east of the river. There were several places here for the Kid to hole up and wait for him, if the Kid wanted to do that. He had shot a couple of men only a month ago in a fight in Rebellion. By the repu-

tation that had trailed him, he had been no saint over in Idaho. Henshaw had learned that from Big Jim Yardley, the sheriff of Gold Rock, the high-mountain town twelve miles west of the Circle Bar that the railroad had given the go-by when it pushed through the country. The Kid, it seemed, had done a lot of shooting in the past, and he might be just fool enough to try to drygulch a man. If he whipped Black Bugle like this, then Eldridge Henshaw would actually appreciate the Kid's trying to get him like that. It would make shooting him to death easier. A hell of a lot easier.

It looked like something was going to take place when Henshaw was three miles up the canyon. Black Bugle suddenly

Eldridge Henshaw. When Henshaw came up to the claybank he found the Kid lying on the ground, with his big Mexican hat pitched drunkenly away in the weeds to his right. His left hand clutched the ends of his claybank's reins in a death grip. It had been a grip that had refused to let go even after the horse had dragged him three yards through the sand after he had plunged out of the saddle from the shock of death suddenly snapping the life out of him.

Somebody had drygulched the Big Hat Kid. A rifle ball had caught him just above the bridge of the nose, ripped in like exploding hell, and had blown out the back of his head. The thing wasn't pretty to look at.

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threw up his head and nickered softly. It was a signal the black always gave his master when he smelled horses ahead. Henshaw slumped himself a little lower in the saddle and drew the Winchester up across his lap. Fifty yards farther up the canyon he pulled to a halt, glimpsing a horse half-hidden in low jackpines and brush ahead of him. A strange feeling suddenly hit Henshaw.

No man needed to tell him that that horse ahead was the Big Hat Kid's old string-halterd claybank. This much of Larch's story was true. The Kid had left the ranch on the claybank, and he never rode that broken-down buzzard-head when there was any work to do on the ranch. The old horse was simply not good enough for hard work on the range.

Henshaw slipped quietly out of his saddle and gave his reins a twist around the saddle horn so that Black Bugle would follow him. He kept to one side of the horse, not wanting to get him shot if the Kid opened up. Probably it was silly, but then . . .

The Big Hat Kid never opened up on

"ONE of them little pea-shooter things," whispered Henshaw as he squatted beside the body and gently rolled it over on its back. "The Kid never knew what hit 'im."

Yes, it was one of those wicked little bullets, about the diameter of a .22 but an inch and a half long. The hole in the Kid's forehead told that. It was a round little hole, so small it looked as if the Kid had been stabbed. Tremendous power had been behind that bullet—enough to knock a grizzly sprawling to instant death in its tracks if the bullet struck a vital spot.

The Kid's body was as stiff as a poker. That meant that he had been dead at least three hours—maybe a lot longer. Some men stiffened quicker than others when life left the body. Only a good doctor would be able to tell.

Henshaw started to break the death grip on the claybank's reins, then changed his mind. He took out his old knife and cut the reins just above the Kid's hand, and then went to work to get the Kid back across the saddle of his claybank. The stiffened body was an unruly one to han-

dle, and Henshaw had to tie it in place with the Kid's saddle rope.

He had just finished the job and stepped back when a fierce cry filled the air a foot above his head. A bullet slapped a big rock just beyond him and glanced away with a sharp whine.

Turning the claybank, Henshaw ripped off the animal's bridle and gave him a swift slap with the reins to send him on back down the canyon. Another bullet came whistling through the air as the horse started away at a shambling gait, left hind foot slapping the ground harder than the others.

Having rid himself of the body of the Kid, Henshaw wheeled and ran for it to the nearest cluster of rocks. He still had the Winchester. This time he was not being caught out in a buckboard or a confounded wagon with no chance to make a two-sided fight of it!

The shots had come from some high lookout spot on up the canyon, so far away it seemed seconds for the reports to sound after the bullets had shrieked through the air just overhead. There was no smoke up there. High-powers used smokeless powder and did not leave any tell-tale sign for a man to target.

Dropped to his hands and knees, dragging the Winchester beside him, he had the cover of the rocks when another bullet came whistling down the canyon. He was still unable to locate his would-be killer's exact position, but he had been listening carefully for the report of each shot. His man, he now decided, would be up there on a bench seven hundred yards away on the north side of the canyon, a little place sheltered by tall rocks and low trees with limbs that came right down to the ground.

Hurrying along, sometimes running in a crouch, sometimes crawling, he at last reached a high point three hundred yards from his original position. It was good shooting range here for the Winchester, and he crowded down behind a rock to wait. A gunman who would drygulch a man usually did something foolish—if one gave him time enough. Henshaw was banking on that.

Black Bugle was still waiting for him down there. That horse instinctively knew when to follow a man and when to stay

put. Henshaw did not have to worry about that. He lay there, waiting and hoping. The minutes dragged. It seemed a devil of a while before he could see limbs on the trees move. Something blood-red flashed. That would be a bandanna around the killer's neck!

♦ ♦ ♦

HE SLID the Winchester forward. He could not see much of the man up there, but it would be enough to lift him out of his place of hiding. A hard, deadly gray eye now lined itself over the sights of the rifle. A slow finger curled on the old Winchester's trigger. The hammer fell with a sharp metallic sound—and Henshaw swore huskily.

For the first time since he had owned it the Winchester had failed to fire! He threw another cartridge into the chamber, again took careful aim, and again the rifle failed him. He turned his head, staring at the butt of the first cartridge that had failed to explode, and saw that the firing-pin had not even marked it.

"Somebody," he growled, carefully laying the rifle to one side, "has filed off my firin'-pin!"

But the killer was still up there, confident that he held all the advantage. Grimly, mouth warped into a leering little smile, Henshaw started moving on again. If that fella would just wait, he was going to bring the fight to him.

Up, over rocks, around them, sometimes dragging himself along flat on his belly, he kept going. If he could get close enough he might take that rooster alive—and then he would find out who he was, why he had killed the Big Hat Kid, and why he wanted to kill him. But it was not destined to turn out like that.

Twice while he was crawling, Henshaw thought his man had fled back through the trees to make his get-away. Once he thought he heard the hoofs of a horse in the distance, but he was not fool enough to take chances, and it was a good thing that he did not. The killer was smart.

The sounds of hoofs were really drumming when he reached the edge of the rise. Going up a small, brush-covered wash, and being careful not to disturb the brush, he reached the rim of the rise, and

squatted slowly back with an ugly grin.

His man was right in front of him now, no more than forty yards away. He was a short, stout man of forty with a close-lying blond beard. In either hand he held a hard-seasoned pine-knot, and he was drumming on a hollow log to make sounds like hoofs racing away from the rise. Not until the man spoke did Henshaw suspect that there were two men up here instead of one.

"See 'im yet, Hank?" The blond turned his head to the right as he spoke. "He's hell in a fight, yuh know."

"I think," answered another voice, "we'd better duck it, Pete. It's too quiet down there to suit me."

The second man now appeared, backing out of a cluster of rocks with a high-powered rifle in his hands. He was a tall, low-browed brute in ragged black, as filthy from head to heel as if he had been greased and dropped through a stove pipe, and his face was covered with a matted red beard. He stumbled on a rock, and swore as he almost fell. At that instant Henshaw arose, a big Colt in each hand.

"Up with 'em!" he snarled. "*Quick!*"

He might as well have tried to make peace with a pair of coiled rattlesnakes by shoving a bare foot between them. The short man wheeled, an oath ripping from the side of his mouth, both hands sawing for his gunbelts. A roaring .45 in Henshaw's right hand sent three balls of lead through him before he could buckle forward and hit the ground.

The tall one was just as big a fool. He dropped his deadlly highpower and tried to jump back for the shelter of the rocks. A slug of lead caught him in the hip, appearing to spin him around in mid-air. Down he went, snarling and screaming like a wounded cougar, both of his hands pawing for his six-shooters. Henshaw's next bullet caught him squarely between the eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Law Will Wait

DARKNESS was settling before Henshaw was ready to start back down the canyon. He had taken a lot of time poking about up here. He

had found the horses of the two gunmen in a little thicket of pines just behind and below the rise. They were good horses, half-thoroughbreds. One was a sorrel and the other a big wall-eyed roan, and both animals carried brands a man would not find anywhere but in the far Southwest.

Henshaw had never seen those men before. They were not rustlers, he was sure. Not, at least, on this job. These dudes had been hired to kill.

The Circle Bar had not been troubled with rustlers for almost a year before Bluenose Bill Harper was ambushed on Wolf Creek. Somebody, somewhere, had simply hired gunmen to knock poor old Bill off to get him out of the way. Why? That question had always burned in Henshaw's brain. Did it have anything to do with the coming of Larch Harper? Something smelled about Larch coming so soon—showing up four days after Bill's funeral!

Henshaw loaded his dead gunmen across their saddles, and led the horses back down the slope to the place where he had left his useless rifle. He was still wondering why those gunmen had killed the Big Hat Kid. They were out for larger game than that, he guessed, and the Kid had just happened to come along—unless *somebody* deliberately sent him straight to his death. That somebody had to be Larch. All manner of simple reasoning told him that.

"An' still," growled Henshaw, "it's maybe 'cause I don't like 'im. A man has to be careful when he doesn't like a fella. It's too easy to put the blame of ever'-thing on 'im—an' a heap of times he ain't deservin' it a-tall. I ain't got too much sense, anyhow, an' when I'm mad at a man I ain't got none. Old boar wild-hog in me, maybe, like my mammy said it was in my daddy when he rid alone into an outlaw stronghold. Still—" he scratched his ear and grinned as he looked up at the sky "—Pa got seven while they were gettin' Pa. One of the best damn Rangers that ever hit Texas, they said."

He heard hoofs up the canyon when he got back to Black Bugle. He swung into his saddle, waiting and watching. A little hump-backed man with a straggly gray mustache and a ragged goatee as white as

snow rode out of the shadows on a tall iron-gray. It was old Pop Warner, one of the best men that ever sawed a rope across a steer's horns for the Circle Bar. Quiet, always quiet, he rode up. Before he spoke he pulled rein, and looked at the dead gunmen warped across their saddles.

"Yore work, Ridge?"

"Mine," nodded Henshaw. "Tried to blast me from that rise up yonder. They got the Big Hat Kid some hours before I come along."

"Bad?"

"This much." Henshaw poked his finger to his forehead just above the bridge of his nose. "Went in there an' tore the mountains down comin' out behind. One of them high-power things yuh see on them saddles done it. Don't know which."

"I've seed the roan hoss before, Ridge." The old man pointed to his saddle horn. Even in the gathering darkness Henshaw could see that the entire top of the horn had been torn to shreds. "Early this mornin', 'twas, back yonder at the foot of the Fiddle Drums. No warnin', just a sudden bust-loose, an' I see that roan streakin' for the timber when I piled off my hoss an' fetched down my rifle." There was a gloomy silence. Then: "Why are folks tryin' to kill us all, Ridge? We done harm to somebody?"

"Dunno, Pop." Henshaw shrugged, then changed the subject. "Larch's kin-folks come."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Nothin' more to say?" Pop Warner looked at him narrowly. "Just come, did they?"

"The girl's nice." Henshaw looked up at the sky again. "Purty as God's little red wagon, Pop. Other seems sorter preacher-like, though I ain't plumb shore yet but what she might turn out all right in the end. She's just a mite like Larch."

"Oh, that, huh?" Warner took a thoughtful squint at the sky. "I'd like to give him a damn good remedy for the botts. Five drops of arsenic on the tongue, an' a pound of Epsom salts."

"I thought," he added after a moment of glum silence, "yuh was gonna kill 'im this mornin', Ridge. Don't do it, son. He ain't worth it. Jim Yardley would be shore as hell to throw yuh in jail. Let me do it.

I need a rest-up, anyhow. If yuh just say the word—"

"Keep yore gun in yore pocket," grinned Henshaw. "I'll do the killin' around here, Pop."

"Don't be too much like Bluenose, son." The old man reached over and put his hand on Henshaw's knee. "An' yuh are like 'im, like a pea from the same pod. Folks go to hell for yuh, Ridge. Yuh ain't bad. Old as I am, I could snake yuh off that saddle an' fan yore hindquarters afire with a good latigo—'f yuh knowed yuh was in the wrong. Bill was just too easy, always waitin' for the other fella to go for his gun first. I figure that's how he got killed."

"I don't!" Henshaw's voice was suddenly bitter. "I figure Bill never did know who shot 'im—or why it was done. I'm yet tryin' to figure it out, an' somethin' tells me the trail's warmin' mighty fast right now, Pop."

"Larch?"

"I ain't sayin'. Let's ride."

♦ ♦ ♦

POP WARNER rode in a thousand yards ahead of him, trailing the two dead gunmen behind him. Henshaw stopped at the edge of the river and bathed Black Bugle's swollen left eye, using his handkerchief for a rag. When he crossed the river just under the little graveyard he could see that there was quite a ruckus going on at the house.

Pop Warner had reached the long log hitchrack in front of the east porch facing the river. A light was burning in the bunkhouse, meaning that the rest of the eight riders for the Circle Bar had come in from work. But there were others, too. In the rising moonlight Henshaw saw a big pinto standing at the hitchrack.

That horse belonged to Big Jim Yardley, the sheriff of Gold Rock.

It was even worse than he expected when he moved on to the house, keeping to the shadows so that he would not be seen until he reached a window at the north end of the huge living room. He had left Black Bugle behind him by simply dropping his reins, otherwise the horse would have been with him, head within a couple of inches of his shoulder and his

muzzle poking out at him now and then.

Larch Harper was pacing the floor angrily and saying all kinds of mean things. Big Jim Yardley sat alongside the table, twiddling with his dyed black mustaches—a big, bald-headed Irishman, as red-faced as a monkey's bottom, gold-capped teeth glinting now and then. Long Am Burrell, Yardley's tall, dark deputy, sat against the wall, chair tilted back, his legs crossed. Zelda Harper and her mother were at the other end of the table. Old Pop Warner stood in the doorway, turning his hat awkwardly in his hands and looking like he wished to hell he was out of it.

Larch was raving, almost slobbering at the mouth. "Ridge Henshaw didn't increase his reputation any when he shot the Big Hat Kid!"

"He didn't shoot 'im, Mister Harper." Old Pop was butting in now and beginning to look mean.

"How do you know he didn't, Pop?" The sheriff spoke up.

"Well—well," faltered the old man, fumbling with his hat, "Ridge said he didn't, that's all."

"Oh, he said he didn't!" Larch was wheeling on Pop. "And that makes it true, I suppose."

"What Ridge says," the old man said, "that I believe, Mister Harper. Ridge ain't no damn liar. Excuse, ladies, please." He bowed awkwardly. "I'm sorter gettin' outa hand, I 'spect. But—but Ridge ain't a liar."

"No, ma'ams, he ain't, Ridge ain't!" Pop straightened, shuffling back his bent shoulders, eyes mean and blue in the lamplight. "The A'mighty knows that about Ridge! He's plumb hell on the gun-throw—hell, death an' the grave! Double-gear'd lightnin' and hell on the draw, by Gawd! But—but yuh, Jim Yardley—" his eyes burned across the room "—know that boy ain't a liar!"

"Go easy, Pop." The sheriff held up his hand. "Ridge's word's good, but he did tell you he killed these other two, didn't he?"

"Well—well, yes," admitted the old man lamely. "I guess he did. I—I'd go to jail for 'im 'f I could."

"Killer—always the killer, Yardley!" Larch Harper was blowing out that nasty

laugh of his again. "And he gets away with it! He left here to shoot the Big Hat Kid—all because of that damned outlaw horse nobody can ride but Ridge Henshaw!"

"A real horse has but one master!" Zelda Harper was on her feet, eyes glistening. "Never mind me, Mother!" She slung the woman's quick hand from her arm. "I'll have my say! I don't like you, Uncle Larchmont! You were always the beast of the family, cold-blooded, cowardly. You killed—you killed—"

"Zelda!" screamed the older woman, lurching up to cover the girl's mouth with her hand. "This is too much for her—too much, I tell you! This child's not used to blood and dead men!"

"Better get her out of here, then!" Larch snarled. "There's always blood and dead men around when Ridge Henshaw's on a job!"



HENSHAW turned away, half sick from the row going on in the living room. He went down to the river's edge and sat there on a rock, thinking. After a while he arose and made his way back to the edge of the graveyard. Black Bugle nickered softly to him as he came through the trees, walking slowly, head down. Henshaw picked up the reins, threw them around the saddle horn, and turned. It was the most natural thing in the world for him to walk to Blue-nose Bill Harper's grave with the horse right behind him.

"They're crowdin' me, Bill." There was a half-whimpering blubber to his tone as he stood there looking down at the grass-grown mound, big hat in his hand. "I've felt it comin' all along. He's yore brother. I don't want to let go. God knows I don't, Bill. I'll tear 'im down like dynamite in the mountains, once I start. I'm holdin'—God knows I'm holdin', Bill. I'd go to hell for one damn' bone outa yore body. Since yuh've gone, ever'thing 'round here seems to be turnin' to dark an' bloody ground. I'm doin' my best, Bill."

"Rip!" The voice whispered behind him. He turned with a jerk, every nerve a steel spring. She was coming toward him now, but he could see that she had

been hiding there behind a tree—maybe listening to what he was saying.

"Yes'm."

"Rip—" she came right on to him, hurrying, fear in her eyes "—Sheriff Yardley's at the house. They're going to jail you, Rip!"

"No, ma'am." His voice was hard, flat. "No man's goin' to jail me. I—I can't go to jail. I've got to stay here."

"Sheriff Yardley has promised Uncle Larchmont to lock you up, Rip. Oh, Rip!" She caught him by the shoulders. "Please go—please ride for it!"

"Why, ma'am, are yuh askin' this?"

"Because, Rip, I'll feel safer." She was against him, misty eyes looking up at him. "Maybe I'm a fool. I don't know, Rip, but I'm afraid here. If you're free, even if you have to dodge, I'll feel better. Don't let them jail you, Rip. I—I don't know anybody here but you. Uncle Bill's letters made me know you long, long before I came. Yardley has no right to jail you!"

"I know Jim Yardley well, ma'am." He spoke with a strange gentleness in his tone. "If he's told Larch he aims to jail me, then I guess he aims just that. He was a friend of Bill's, an' Bill was a friend of mine. It makes Bill's friends my friends, yuh see, the way I figure things. But—" he shook back his shoulders and looked up at the stars through the trees. "—I don't want to go hurtin' 'im. I ain't afraid of God, man nor devil, ma'am. I figure I've got just so long to live. When dyin' time comes I'll meet it, an' nary kick yuh're goin' to hear outa me then."

"An' this sheriff fella now." He looked back at the ground awkwardly. "Well, ma'am, Bill got his name of 'Bluenose' from him. Up on the Devil Winds, they say. Seventy below zero that winter. Bill an' this sheriff fella got caught up there on the Devil Winds in the blizzard, they say, only the sheriff wasn't sheriff then. He fell an' broke his leg. Bill carried 'im on his back, mushin' through the snow for forty mile' to a doctor in the teeth of the wind. His nose got froze all over his face. It was always blue after that."

"Rip—" she came even closer, inching up, hands tightening on his shoulders. "—I don't want anything to happen to you! If—if something does I'll die."

He smiled down at her, lower lip trem-

bling. "I reckon I won't let anything happen, now, ma'am."

That was how it happened. The moon was creeping over the mountains, the stars were looking down, and there was Bill lying close by.

Suddenly, like a gunfight breaking quick and startling, he had her in his arms, sweeping her up to him. His lips found hers, just as if Bluenose Bill guided them there. In a few moments it was over, like gunsmoke in the air and blood and dead men on the floor—as quick as that, just as pulse-beating, just as nostril-quivering, but a heap harder on the heart.

And then, like a mad dog striking in the darkness, the heavy roar of a .45 sped its thunder into the night. A stab of pain tore up and down him, from the crown of his head to his heels. He took a blind step forward, knees buckling, and pitched face-first to the ground behind the mound of Bluenose Bill Harper's grave. The girl screamed and fell with him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flaming Guns on Boothill

ALTHOUGH he really never knew it, Henshaw's long old .45's were like drum-fire stabbing the night with deadly gashes of flying lightning slithering across Bluenose Bill Harper's grave. A man yelled hoarsely and dropped, another spun around on his heel, a third turned to run, and lead cut him down, heart-high, and sent him pitching riverward like a spinning cartwheel through the rocks and brush. The rest was lost in what appeared to be eternal darkness—a great, gulping black cloud settling over him. Both arms across the grave, he lay there, unmindful, unknowing that the girl was sobbing.

There was a shower of lights, spinning, wobbling drunkenly before him. Voices filled his ears. Spurred heels rang on the floor. When he opened his eyes wider he saw Larch Harper standing over him, cursing him at the top of his voice. Then he saw that he was sprawled flat on his back like a dead man waiting for a coffin on the long table in the center of the big living room. Somebody had taken his guns away from him. Handcuffs, cold and

shiny, were on his wrists. Somewhere a girl was crying.

"This ends it!" Larch was raving. "This stops the bloodshed. I hope to hell he dies on your hands before you get him to your confounded jail, Yardley."

"I don't." That was from the sheriff, just to Henshaw's left. "Ridge is too nice a fellow for that, Harper. I'm sending two of the boys for a doctor. Don't aim to move 'im off that table until the doctor gets here. When I do move 'im it'll be in a buckboard with a good bed under him and two horses so's not to jar him."

"You take damned good care of your prisoners, Yardley."

"It ain't my right nor my way to treat 'em mean," answered the Irishman, "though I do have to hang a man now an' then when I just can't get out of it—if you know what I mean, Harper."

"No, damn it, I don't know!" sneered Harper. "I just know this much about you, Jim Yardley: You're a thick-headed Irish lug—just a sentimental damned fool!"

"It is far better to be that than a cold-blooded murderer."

Zelda Harper had come in. Old Pop Warner was with her, and Pop had probably been doing a lot of talking to her in some rear room of the house. Pop never could keep his mouth shut.

"Yes, it is better than a man murdering his own brother!" the girl was rushing on. "He killed my father, his own brother, years ago back in Ohio. Because of his mother, my grandmother, the family would not prosecute him!"

"So you're bringing that up, you lousy little wench!" Larch Harper filled the room with his voice. "They couldn't prove a damned thing on me in Ohio."

"No, by Gawd, maybe yuh hired some jackass like me to do it!"

The voice came from almost under the table. Henshaw heard feet scrape, somebody blundering about on the floor, and then a man arose, hanging to the edge of the table and tottering, eyes bloodshot.

It was Steve Kelky, the man who had started the fight in Rebellion.

"I'm dyin' an' know it." Kelky was still weaving, rocking from side to side, and blood was beginning to smudge his

lips as he raked his tongue in and out. "It was me who got hired to come here an' blast Bill Harper outa the picture. Me who sent the men in to do it. Hired by yuh, Larch, an' we ain't yet been paid more'n half we got comin'."

"Look at me, damn yuh, yuh pop-eyed whale!" Kelky laughed thickly. "Yuh wanted that woman an' gal killed, too. Sent for 'em this mornin' in a buckboard that oughta fell to pieces when I had my men open up on Henshaw down the river to kill 'im an' make the brons run. My men killed the Big Hat Kid, too. Yuh wanted it, Larch, an' then it seems that Henshaw got them two what done the killin', though yuh swore to me the last time yuh was in town that yuh had filed off his Winchester's firin' pin."

"All right!" The man weaved, almost fell; he was going fast. "I come here to-night to make shore Henshaw was finished up. I—I got 'im, I guess. But—but he got—got me up at the graveyard."

Steve Kelky hung there at the edge of the table for another moment, then his grip gave and he slumped to the floor.

"He's a damned liar!" Larch snarled. "I never saw him before, Yardley."

"You was seen drinkin' with 'im three nights ago in the Cowboy's Friend."

"That's a damned lie!" Harper was back against the wall. "Toto! Toto!"

"So sorry, must do!"

Toto, that damned grinning Jap, had appeared, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. In either hand was a sawed-off shotgun. They were big, eight-gauge, double-barreled weapons.

"Be pleased to put up the hands!" smirked the Jap. "So sorry."

♦ ♦ ♦

"**Q**UICK work on the part of your Jap, Harper." The sheriff laughed mirthlessly, hands in the air as he backed toward the table. "How do you expect to get away with all this stuff, old man?"

"There's a dry well on the slope above the house." Harper's tone was cocksure. "Five men are in the bunkhouse, but they're sound asleep by this time. The two men you sent to Gold Rock will

go to sleep in their saddles and fall out of them before they get there. Toto saw to that when they had their coffee at the supper table. Just in case of an accident, you see, Sheriff. I don't make bets to lose them."

"I see you don't. Aim to kill us all?" Yardley sneered.

"Don't know—yet!" Harper snarled. "I didn't figure you in on this deal, Yardley. Didn't figure that Steve Kelky would spill his guts like he did. I ordered that sleeping dope put in the coffee cups before you got here. You forced the issue by coming."

"I see." The sheriff was grinning a sickly little smile.

The sheriff had backed close to the table, so close that Henshaw felt one of the man's ivory-buffed .45's rubbing against his left elbow. Toto was coming forward by this time, still grinning.

"Take guns," ordered the Jap, speaking from the side of his mouth to Harper. "Take all guns."

Harper was coming forward now, and the sheriff was hard against the table, hands in the air. For a split second Harper was between the sheriff and the Jap with the guns.

"Somebody's lookin' in at the window, Harper."

The sheriff said that, and Harper turned his head for an instant to look. Evidently Yardley intended to take him off his guard longer than that and have a chance to go for his weapons. Harper was too quick for him, but he was not too quick for Henshaw. He made a fast twist with his arms, handcuffs biting into his flesh. It was almost quicker than the eye, but one of those hands now held a .45.

Big Jim Yardley played his next part as if he had rehearsed it dozens of times. Hands still up, he lunged forward, belly to belly with Harper, staggering him back toward the Jap. The Jap shrieked something and leaped to one side, and the big Colt in Henshaw's hand roared.

It was a shot that forever wiped away that brazen smile on the Jap's monkey-like face. One of the guns in his hands went off, scattering buckshot and slugs of lead into the floor, but a .45's bullet

had struck him in the mouth, just below the upper lip, right where the teeth were the largest.

Yardley was still mixing it with Larch Harper when Henshaw slid half-drunkenly off the side of the table. Harper had gone for his guns. Yardley had slapped his arms downward, pinning Harper's arms to his side.

In a straining, rocking reel, both men were slithering across the floor when Henshaw spoke. "Cut loose from him, Jim. He's my meat now."

Yardley tore away. It was only for an instant. In that instant a .45 was roaring at the table—one! two! three! four! The lamplight jumped as the heavy concussions filled the room. It was like a short burst from a machine gun. Every ball hit squarely, smashing straight into Larch Harper's big, liver-lipped face. Then Henshaw himself was going down, slumping beside the table. The room was growing very dark. . . .

"No, ma'am, I don't remember much of it," he told her as he lay in bed four days later. "I guess I sorter lost track of things."

"It had to be, Rip. Even Uncle Bill would have wanted it like that, and mother says it was the best thing that could have happened. It's going to be nice to have you as half-owner of the Circle Bar with me."

"Half-owner, ma'am?" He looked at her with a frown.

"You would have been that with the clock or without it, Rip," she smiled. "You kept talking about it, and finally I took the darned thing down and went after it with a screw driver. I found a secret drawer in it. Uncle Bill's will was in it. He had left his brother only five dollars. You got half and I got half. Do you remember asking me to marry you, Rip?"

"No, ma'am, I reckon I don't." A slow smile crawled across his pale face. "I reckoned that was what yuh call a foregone conclusion after I kissed yuh up yonder in the graveyard. I ain't like some men, yuh see. It don't take me long to make up my mind. Why, hell, ma'am, I made up my mind when we was ridin' home in the buckboard!"

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



The one-legged tinker of Benbow County watched the sky turn red with the blood of a looming war, and the only tools he had to stop it were his sorry old mule, a stolen rifle—and the guts of twenty young men!



The kid approached gingerly, taking long moments to draw close and bend over his victim.

The Tinker Mends A War

CLEM MARTIN and his overloaded, packsaddled mule were part and parcel of Benbow County. They'd been tramping the section roads when they were wagon-tracks and the county council had been meeting in the

back room of Tuttle's store in River Ford. They had their friends and their enemies—these two—their place in the basin.

Old folks knew Clem Martin could repair a break in anything from a hanging lamp to a worn-out harness. Young folks

came to know it, too. The tinker and his mule belonged to Benbow as much as its lush grass, its good cattle, and its quarrels between big men and their lesser neighbors.

Thus it was that when Clem came stumping down the tree-shaded lane to Eph Tremain's place, he expected a different kind of greeting. Eph had a pair of likely girls and Clem knew all that went on in the county. A glass of milk from the well-house and a thick-slabbed sandwich were fair exchange for gossip about the boys in the upper valley or the doings of Rance Kelley, at the huge O-Bar ranch, against the foothills.

Business had been worse than poor, this last circuit. Clem's wooden leg was fitting poorly. Nell, the old mule, was growing slower and more of a mind of her own. And there were too many strangers in Benbow, these days. Clem's nature was rubbed a little raw by these things. To be met in Tremain's dooryard by the old man, himself, instead of the bright-eyed, teasing girls, set wrong with him.

"We got all the patchin' we can stand, Clem," Tremain said. And that set wrong, too. Clem was thirsty and said so. Tremain nodded inhospitably to the pump.

"You got to prime it, but it's cold."

When Clem Martin had been a boy with two good legs under him, he'd had his turn on the sea. A Long Tom had put a shell aboard his ship at Charleston and he'd lost a leg. When he'd got a peg to fit, he'd come ashore with his sailor's hands and turned tinker. And he'd brought ashore with him a sea-faring man's scorn of water. A poor thing for a man to drink! It had no body and didn't nourish the belly. Drink it and you sweated it right off in the sun. The one fit beverage for a hair-chested man, rum, was unknown in Benbow. But among others, Eph Tremain made a fair brew of corn. The girls had smuggled it out to him once or twice when he could remember that Rance Kelley had asked after Sue, eldest of the pair.

Eph could pour out a glass of it now and be sociable for a minute. Or, if the barrel was empty—and there was a haggard look to Eph's face like he'd emptied it himself in recent days—he could fetch up a mug of cold milk which would go

good in the shag end of a long afternoon. But water—well water from an unprimed pump! Hell! Clem snorted.

"Where's your women, Eph?" he asked in sour hopefulness. "Maybe they'll remember something busted you've forgot." And he added to himself, "Maybe something, too, fit to prime a man's innards!"

Tremain shook his head, an unaccountable impatience lining his face. Clem watched him in the doorway, standing so that he carefully filled the opening, and he suddenly decided Eph didn't want him here in the yard at all.

"The women's gone off to Larámie for the week," Eph said shortly. "Sue thinks she wants off to school and they're lookin' into it."

Clem scowled. Sue Tremain hadn't wanted to leave Benbow the last time he had seen her. Not while young Kelley was riding the range back of his dad's big ranch and they could meet in the timber come a time or two when they had figured right. And there wasn't anything in the bare rooms of Tremain's house that the homesteader would want to hide from the eyes of a one-legged tinker who had been his friend for years.

"You could have flagged me down when you seen me turn in the lane, Eph," he protested. "Walkin' ain't a pleasure to me on this wooden pin and I don't come in off the road less'n there's business waitin'!"

Tremain shrugged, wholly without friendliness. "I got chores. I got my land to hold and my family to feed. Walkin's your worry, Clem."

The tinker scowled again. "If you're needin' me next month, then, Eph, you better put a sign on your fence along the road or you'll wait a long time for your pots to get fixed!"

Tremain made no answer, turning back into the house and closing his door. Clem started back out of the yard. But the old mule, Nell, hung back. Clem prodded her with the flat of his hand against her rump. She stood still, shaking her ugly, bony head. A sudden curiosity stabbed through Clem. To most folks Nell was plain mule, set apart from the rest of her miserable breed by a special and unaccountable stubbornness. To Clem she was an able partner. There was understanding between

them, which accounted for the fact that Nell never made her owner trouble without just cause and, in turn, Clem loaded her only with her packs and never added his own weight, walking, instead, on his wooden leg.

Nell didn't want to leave Tremain's, which was proof enough to Clem there was reason for staying. He walked around the animal, coming up to her head, and he saw, then, the thing she saw. Eph had a ratty old barn which Clem had twice tried to contract the rebuilding of, without success. The door of this barn was held closed by a length of heavy rope, looped over a pair of spikes. One of these loops hung down now, trailing a spike dragged from rotting wood, and the door gaped.

Inside, Clem could see the battered stalls. Clem had his cow in there, and his plowing team. Clem couldn't see Eph's bony riding mare, but he could see pony after pony in the dark interior. Tremain's barn held more value in horseflesh than the whole of his homestead was worth, and not one of them belonged to Eph. It was a queer thing. Clem started toward the barn, but the back door of the house snapped open and a thin, pinch-faced stranger leaned against the casing, a black gun in his hand.

"Get moving, Uncle!" the stranger said flatly.

Clem looked at the man, looked at the gun, saw they were a bad combination, and turned back toward Nell. The old mule wheeled clumsily and they started up the lane. Clem didn't look back once. He didn't have to. Something was wrong at Eph Tremain's. Something that put old Eph in up to his ears, making him surly to his friends and unhappy. Something which had driven his women away. And maybe some business for that tinker of Benbow County who boasted he could mend all things.



IT WAS near dark when Clem Martin stumped into River Ford. He stopped by Tuttle's store, but Jim had gone home for his dinner. Clem went on to the livery, lifted the packs off Nell's ridged back and saw that she had a stall and feed.

Then he went back to the Chinaman's. Old Bull Kelley and young Rance and four O-Bar riders were in the place. Sheriff Grumley was sitting next to Bull Kelley. Neal Farrel, River Ford's counsellor at law, and two or three other townsmen were spread out along the line of stools, nearly filling the little restaurant. The Chinaman was sweating over his stove and griddle. Argument was keen in the room.

Clem stumped along behind the other occupants, finding a place at the last stool, back in the corner. As he sat down, Bull Kelley bounced the silverware along ten feet of the counter with his huge fist.

"I got no quarrel with anybody and I stick to the law like a peeler to a bronc," he bawled. "Everybody knows that! But by hell, I'll see every one of 'em dead with my own lead afore I'll back an inch from them wormy mavericks that're bellyachin' over the grass on the mesa!"

"You keep your guns in your belt, Bull," Sheriff Grumley said quietly. "And you keep out of the way. Benbow's never had any nightriders and I reckon Benbow's law can break this bunch up."

"The devil you say!" Bull Kelley growled. "Look here, Grumley, you've been out three nights with your posse and what happens. Them coyotes split up, lead you a merry chase, and get their dirty work in, too. Last time it cost me two miles of new fence and two of my best breedin' bulls. Buck any way you like, but Rance and me and my boys are ridin' with you tonight. And I promise you one way or another I'll have those busters whipped afore sun-up!"

Young Rance Kelley picked up his fork and turned it in his hands. "Dead bulls aren't like dead men, dad," he said slowly. "You can buy one, but not the other. Maybe we should give the sheriff another night, at least."

Old Bull stabbed an accusing stare at his son. "Why, damn your eyes, you young whelp!" he grated. "How you aim to hold the O-Bar together when I'm gone if you won't fight, now? You think I'm forgetting that those homesteaders are neighbors, some of them friends? You think I'm so blamed old I don't know there's a pretty girl or two among 'em? Listen, I know those things. But I'm re-

memberin' the long years it took me and your ma to build the O-Bar up so's you could have it, some day.

"I'm rememberin' the old battles we had and the tough seasons. I'm rememberin' I never crowded man or critter beyond the law, but I took all that was comin' to me. I'll not run a man your size. You can do what you please. But I'm riding with Grumley tonight, and when we're done, there won't be no more night-riders plaguing my ranch!"

Rance Kelley colored deeply, the rich dye of anger. But he held his lips tight. In a moment, when attention had turned away from him, Clem saw the boy's head dip toward his lap and a folded letter in his hands, there. Quietly he opened the sheet and ran his eyes across its lines. Farther up the counter, Neal Farrel spoke to Rance's father.

"Law was never made with the idea of getting all the justice necessary for peace written down," Farrel said slowly. "Law is just a guide, Bull. I know you've got legal patents to that mesa grazing land, delivered over the seal of the land office. So long as you pay your fees on that lease, the land is yours. But the O-Bar herds are the biggest in the county, now. Do they have to be expanded? Do you have to have that mesa land? Do you have to take it away from the homesteaders who have been using it? With the mesa under fence they haven't any place to turn except to the few straggling acres they have proved up on. I wondered if you saw it that way?"

Bull Kelley turned in his seat. "Farrel, the man who fights for the underdog can maybe hold his head up stiff on his neck when he walks down the street. But he can't build a big house nor raise a big family. The little dogs have got no money and they can't pay for what they get. It's a damn shame to see a man lose graze he's been usin'. But if he loses it fair, it ain't a crime. And there ain't no call for a lawyer to poke his nose in!"

Kelley's voice had the irate snap of an order in it. Silence hung in the restaurant for a moment. Even the Chinaman, who liked young Farrel, paused a moment to see what would happen. Into the silence, a long train whistle sounded suddenly loud. Clem noted it absently. That

would be the six-fifteen mail from Laramie. After a long moment, young Farrel nodded quietly to Bull.

"My job is to promote peace and some sort of justice, Kelley," he said softly. "What I said just now was for the good of the county—yours as well as the homesteaders. I've taken fees from the O-Bar. Maybe I will again if the case is just. But I promise you that sooner or later, if you keep on trading acres for neighbors and hard words for friendliness, I'll stand in court one day and see the O-Bar broken across your stubborn head!"

While Farrel was talking, Rance Kelley slid out of his seat, lifted down his hat, and started noiselessly up the aisle. Frowning, Clem Martin came down on his wooden leg and followed him slowly. Bull Kelley stared at Farrel, not even seeing the two men who passed behind him. As Clem reached the door he heard the old man mutter an answer to the attorney, the words of which he could not hear. But the tone was unmistakable. Bull Kelley was as solid as the granite escarpment under which he had built his ranch. There was no turning back, no regrets, and no weaknesses in the course of Kelley's O-Bar.



FOLLOWING young Rance onto the street, he saw Bull's son turn west toward the lower part of town. Keeping a discreet distance from the young rancher, he trailed him down to the shadows pressing in about the railroad station. Rance walked uncertainly, as though he was not entirely sure of himself. Near the end of the freight platform, another figure detached itself from the shadows, dropped a little traveling case, and threw its arms around Rance's broad shoulders.

Clem recognized the soft, eager voice of Sue Tremain. "Rance! You got my answer to your letter, then. I left mother a note in the hotel room at Laramie. And Mable knows about it. She'll take care of mother. But what about us, here? Dad was in a terrible mood when we left. There had been two or three strange riders come to the house from over in the Utah country. I didn't like the looks of them.

And the rest of the homesteaders dropped by a lot oftener than they used to. I've been worried the whole time we've been away. All of them—dad, too—set a lot by the mesa land your dad leased from the government. Has there been any trouble?"

Rance Kelley pulled the girl close to him.

"Not for us, honey," he said. "We'll not wait here. I've got a wagon waiting on the creek. We'll be south into Colorado and half way to La Porte by morning. I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"Colorado?"

"Colorado, Sue. That's best for us."

The girl pulled away. "It would be a poor start for us to make a mistake in the first hour. This is our valley, Rance. This is where we've got our roots—and where we belong."

Young Kelley said something Clem could not hear. A certain unwillingness came over Clem to be any longer a party to this conversation, and hating embarrassment worse than any other feeling, he turned silently back toward the town. In front of the Chinaman's, men were bringing up horses and a loose crowd was milling.

Clem saw that Bull Kelley seemed unaware that Rance was missing. He saw also, with surprise, that Neal Farrel had a horse and was up in the saddle with the plain intention of riding with this posse.

Swinging away from the crowd, Clem hurried swiftly to the livery and led Nell into the open.

"It's mutiny, I reckon," he whispered with dry humor, "but I reckon I got to sit your decks, after all. We got to be hull down out'n this town before that posse gets rollin'. And worse, we got to get a salvo acrost the bows of Eph Tremain's crew afore them two bunches meet up and more good ships is scuttled than this valley can stand!"

Nell's loyalty to Benbow was not so strong as that of her master. She humped clumsily half a dozen times, trying to unseat him, and afterwards grunted protestingly with every step at his weight. But Clem knew Nell and let the protests ride. It was enough that the old girl was picking them up and putting them down with a swift and awkward regularity.

IT WASN'T too hard to figure it all out when a man traveled the width of the county and heard the gossip from every angle. The mesa had long been open land, but it had at the same time been leasable. The homesteaders had filed on the bottoms, where they could grow and cut hay. For summer graze, they'd used the mesa. O-Bar, at last outgrowing its titled land and still driven onward by Bull Kelley's ambition, had filed lease application on the mesa, had paid the fees, and been awarded the lease. O-Bar fencing had cut the mesa off and the homesteaders, with their small herds, were without graze.

O-Bar's lease was legal. The homesteaders had no place to turn save to violence and intimidation. They had brought in a few loose riders out of the Utah ranges to back them up. Clem had no doubt that Tremain and the rest had hoped that a few cases of dead breeding stock and some ruptured fences would serve to remind Kelley that they were desperate. He had no doubt the homesteaders thought old Bull might back up a little bit for them when he saw they were in earnest about it.

But Tremain and the rest were fools. They had been neighbors of Bull Kelley long enough to know violence was a challenge to him. The gathering of riding horses at Eph's place and the thin-faced strangers in Eph's house were a grim threat and a brave enough gesture for any man but Bull Kelley. The master of the O-Bar, like Nell, was ingrained to the center with his stubbornness and his pride in his ranch. With the law behind him, Kelley would welcome an open war and chance to prove again that the thing he had built with his hands and which he aimed to pass on to his son was invincible. . . .

The ride out the south road toward the lip of the mesa was a hard thing for Clem Martin. There were many things he had learned on the sea, but none of them were any help in clinging to the unsaddled back of a bony and rough-gaited mule. His wooden leg made gripping Nell's back a stiff problem and he counted the miles until he could gain the lead he wanted over the townsmen and dismount.

Full darkness was less than half an hour old when he came to the corner-marker of the O-Bar's new lease on the mesa. He

had hoped to be ahead of the homesteaders, to get set before they came. But the corner posts were down and the shining wire a snarled, reaching tangle in the lush grass. He swung his mule along the line of downed fence, still riding hard, and in another handful of minutes, a shot snatched at him out of the dark ahead. He rolled from Nell's back, gratefully heard the mule hammer on where immediate identification was unlikely. And he lay still in the grass.

One of the Johnson boys, from down below Tremain's place, came running up with his rifle at trail. The kid looked scared to death in the poor light, and half sick. Clem judged that the kid's shot, which had gone comfortably wide of him, was his first effort at fighting a war, and that the kid was surprised and upset that the bullet apparently had tallied.

There was a temptation in Clem to sit up, taking the strain of having killed a man from the kid, and to read him a lecture which might cure him permanently of throwing lead at his fellows. But Clem knew there was a tough go up ahead somewhere and that this was primed to become tonight a full war. Being such, he had grave need of a gun, himself, and this was the one way to get it.



THE kid approached gingerly, taking long moments to draw close and bend over his victim. When he was bent above him, Clem doubled his stumped leg and drove the point of his peg into the kid's mid-section. The boy folded convulsively without a sound. Clem caught the rifle as it fell, pushed the retching kid onto his face before he had time to identify the man who had struck at him from the ground, and ran hobbling forward in the direction from which the kid had come.

He found Tremain at the center of seven or eight men working on the fence. Several of them, strangers he had never seen before, turned hostilely toward him. Eph restrained them with a sharp word. Then he seized Clem's arm.

"You nosey old fool!" Tremain snapped. "You got more brains than sense! So you figured what was up when you got a peep into my barn and seen a

strange face at my door! You ought to be trottin' alongside your mule clean down to the other end of the county by now. What the devil you doing out here?"

Clem pulled away from Tremain's grip. "Maybe I am nosey!" he snapped. "But I got my business to look out after, same's anybody else. Where the hell'd I be if all my customers got theirselves kilt off? Listen. I just left River Ford. Grumley's got a big posse out tonight. But worse, Kelley and some of his boys is riding with it and they aim to clean up the mesa, permanent. There's better ways to do this than getting killed, Eph Tremain!"

Tremain pulled himself up sharply. "Get up the tools and get to saddle, boys!" he snapped. Some of the other homesteaders ran up, concern sharp on their faces. It was plain they wanted to do no serious damage to the O-Bar, that they wanted no spilled blood.

Old man Johnson bellowed frantically, "My boy was out there somewheres and I can't locate him!"

"I'll mind your boy," Clem answered him. He turned back to Tremain. "Nell ain't the fastest mount in the county. The posse'll be close. You ain't got time to get off the mesa. Hole up in the draw back a half a mile. I'll meet the boys and see what I can do. But for Lord's sake, hold your fire till they're breathin' in your face. This ain't going to be easy!"

Tremain muttered something which might have passed for a grudging agreement and thanks. The homesteaders and the thin-faced men out of Utah they had brought in to bolster their courage and help them in their task, mounted and drew off. Clem Martin hunkered down awkwardly beside the broken wire.

There was a lot of difference between this and mending a leaky pot with a rivet or solder and iron. There were ambition, desperation, and the hatred of little men for those who stand higher in the world than themselves. There were injustice and the interminable misunderstandings of the law. Tremain and the rest of the homesteaders would back out of it, now. They had known they were beaten from the beginning. This fence-tapping and the rest of their minor violence was but an outlet for their hopelessness.

But Bull Kelley was another matter.

His O-Bar had moved according to the law. And his O-Bar had been hurt, its fences broken and its stock killed. Kelley would have his full revenge, so that no man could say he had dared the big ranch and won out. Kelley's pride was deep in this and there would be no turning back.

In these moments, Clem Martin regretted he had been tinker to Benbow County these long years—that he had friends on either side and could understand and feel the motives which drove each to its own actions. This was no proper place for him and he knew it. Yet there was no one else in the county to stand beside him, now. And the war had to be turned. It had to be turned not only to avoid bloodshed this one night but bitterness through coming years. It had to be turned so that young folks coming to age, like Rance Kelley and the Tremain girl, could have their own lives, unblemished by the hatred of their fathers.



SHERIFF GRUMLEY'S posse had climbed to the mesa at the other rim. They came thundering across in a wide crescent, fanning for sign of damage. Someone of them found the cut fence three hundred yards from where Clem waited. He was about to raise up, to go down into their milling circle about the discovery, when a voice stopped him. "Clem! Clem Martin! Where are you?"

Clem froze tight. The voice was unmistakable. He wheeled, running unevenly toward the girl who was hurrying along the fence, calling out to him.

"Miss Sue!" he barked shortly. "Wha—?"

She broke him off. "Oh, Clem. You've got to help! I wouldn't go to Colorado with Rance. I wouldn't run away from Benbow's troubles. Rance was angry. He told me what was coming on the mesa. I made him bring me out here. He heard what you said to dad, and he left me. He just rode away. He's going back to join the O-Bar. They've got to be stopped. I found Nell grazing in the hollow there, and I hoped you'd come back this way. You've got to do something!"

"You want Rance?"

The girl nodded, the pert face which was usually so gay and teasing now white with strain. Clem patted her shoulder.

"You'll get him. Go back and keep Nell company till I whistle for you!"

Sue Tremain turned away as though what Clem Martin said was the law, as though there could be no doubt he would keep his word. Clem shook his head after her. Here was proof of why he was mixed in this quarrel over the mesa. Here was proof of how good a friend even a tinker could make in Benbow through the years.

Turning back toward the posse, Clem ran hard, each step driving his peg into the sod so that he had to jerk it free by main force. Rance Kelley was shoving through the crowd toward his father as Clem plunged among them. He grabbed young Kelley's arm, spinning him about.

"Don't tell the old fool!" he shouted loudly. "He wants a war for his sainted ranch. Let him have it!"

Rance paused, looking startled. Old Bull pulled away from those gathered about him and caught at his son's other arm.

"Tell me what?" he asked angrily. Rance shook his head in puzzlement. Clem dropped the lever of his rifle and pulled it up, forcing a fresh shell into the chamber.

"That him and Sue Tremain are runnin' off together. That they'll have no part of a county gone cockeyed account of a mule-headed old man with more land already than he knows what to do with!" Clem Martin spat the words out.

Old Bull's face darkened apoplectically. "With the Tremain wench!" he exploded. "By the devil, these sodbusters don't care where they hit a man!" He jerked Rance roughly. "You ride off Benbow land with that girl and you'll never ride back!"

Unable to understand what was happening, the tone of his father's voice when he spoke of Sue hit Rance Kelley like a blow to the face. He jerked away. His voice was soft and white hot.

"What you'd make of this county isn't worth one day of Sue's company. Keep it and be damned, Bull Kelley!"

Rance turned on his heel and strode off into the darkness toward where the girl was waiting. Clem had never been sure

until this moment whether he thought young Kelley was Sue Tremain's kind of man. He knew, now. As Bull started forward, hotly clawing out his gun as he might have lifted a razor-strap in other years against his son, Clem thrust the rifle under his arm forward.

"You'll let 'em be, Bull," he said. "And you'll stand where you are!"

The whole of Benbow County saw this: Sheriff Grumley and Lawyer Farrel and Tuttle and the rest. All of them saw it and made their judgments. It was a long and tight moment in which Bull Kelley's pride fought a great battle in the man so that he shook to his boot-toes. It was a moment in which Clem Martin held his breath, his eyes fastened to the gun in Bull Kelley's huge fist. Then the big man broke. He pouched his weapon.

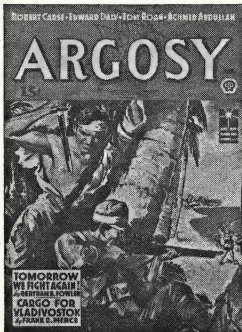
"Bring Rance and the girl back, Clem," he said quietly. Turning to Neal Farrel, he put his hand on the lawyer's arm. "Them sodbusters must be out there in the brush along the draw. Tell 'em to ship their Utah boys home and come into town tomorrow. You get a copy of my lease on

this mesa and draw up a cancellation. I'll come in to your office about noon."

Clem Martin stared at the old rancher, still uncertain. Bull grinned wearily at him. "Jack your shell out, you meddlin' old fool," he said. "And go on down after them kids afore they pull out into some-thing' rash. If Benbow likes the way the O-Bar is so well that you and Rance and Eph Tremain's gal'll fight me on my own ground for it, then, by hell, it's time I left it be and took to livin' easy. If Rance wants to swell his herds some day, he can fight it out for the mesa—after you and your mule and me are gone!"

"Kelley," Clem Martin said simply, "I'll buy you a drink!" His eyes raised to the rest of the posse, only now breaking up into little groups of grinning, satisfied men. "I'll buy you all a drink!"

Which was a rash statement, since this had been a poor season and his cash was low. But when a man has lived in a basin among its people a long span of years, a certain rashness is his right when peace has been secured. Clem grinned and whistled for Nell.



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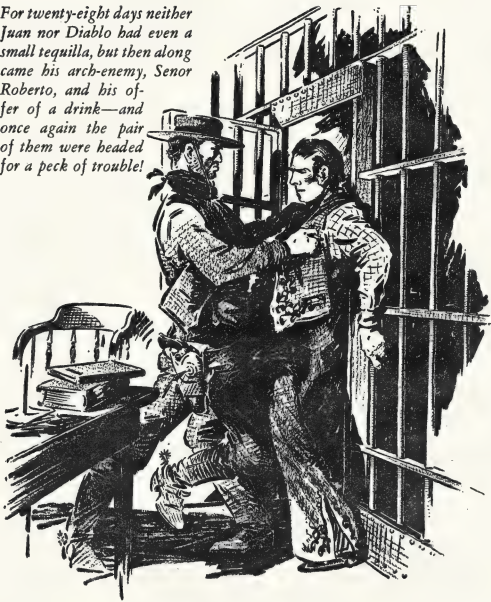
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For twenty-eight days neither Juan nor Diablo had even a small tequilla, but then along came his arch-enemy, Senor Roberto, and his offer of a drink—and once again the pair of them were headed for a peck of trouble!



Perkins propelled him backward into the cell.

One Too Many Diablos!

By BILL GULICK

RIDING lazily down the dusty main street of Tres Rios, Juan Ibanez mused that he had a right to be proud of himself. Twenty-eight days ago he had gone on the wagon. Since then,

he had not so much as smelled the cork of a tequilla bottle. Undoubtedly, he reflected, he was a man of strong will power.

To test that will power, he tied his horse, Diablo, at the hitchrail in front of

the How Many Saloon, dismounted and stood gazing disinterestedly at a sign which advertised his used-to-be favorite brand of tequilla. Nothing happened. His mouth didn't even water. He sighed and rolled a cigarette. It was amazing what love could do to a man.

Diablo, a dirty gray, angular horse of doubtful ancestry, nickered and cocked a hopeful eye at Juan. He had not had a drink of tequilla for nearly a month either, and to a horse with such an overdeveloped appetite for strong drink as his, that was a long, long time.

"Do not complain," Juan said reprovingly, and scratched Diablo's left ear. "We are doing this for Rosita. She says we are drunken, lazy no-goods. We will prove her wrong, no?"

Diablo shook his head in disgust. He didn't care what Rosita thought of them.

Juan lit the cigarette and started walking leisurely down the street toward the general merchandise store. Passing the How Many, he couldn't keep his steps from lagging a bit. It seemed wrong, somehow, to pass the saloon without stopping in. He wondered if Rosita would mind if he took just one little one.

Suddenly the saloon doors swung open and a slim, dark, elegantly dressed gentleman came out. His white shirt was spotless; his black trousers were neatly pressed. His face was smooth-shaven except for a tiny spot on his upper lip which was covered with a carefully waxed, immaculately groomed mustache. Seeing Juan, he waved a friendly hand.

"Hello, amigo. I am glad to see you."

Juan scowled. It was not like Señor Roberto de Alvarez to be so friendly. He had never liked Juan. He had once been a rival for Rosita's hand. Juan shrugged. But if Señor Roberto wanted to let bygones be bygones, he was willing to do the same.

"It is a nice day," Juan said.

"A beautiful day," Señor Roberto exclaimed. "Have you done your ploughing yet?"

Juan winced. Why were people always reminding him of such unpleasant things?

"No," he answered, looking thoughtfully up at the clear, cloudless sky. "No, I do not think the weather is quite right for ploughing."

"You are wise," Señor Roberto said, nodding. "Very wise. Come in and have a drink with me."

"I am very busy," Juan lied weakly.

"Just a little one. To celebrate your approaching wedding."

A vagrant puff of breeze carried the tickling fumes of tequilla to Juan's nostrils. His mouth watered. Behind him, Diablo snorted hopefully. Suddenly Juan drew himself up tall and straight. "*Gracias*, señor, but I am a very busy man. *Adios*."

Holding his breath for a full minute, he moved quickly down the street. It was all right, he mused, to test your will power a little bit. But you must not overdo it.

The sun shone pleasantly down on his broad sombrero as he walked toward the general store. The people whom he met smiled and spoke greetings to him. It made him feel very good. He was a respected citizen now, he thought. He owned a small farm and two horses. He had not been drunk for a month. Hoss Perkins, the sheriff, had not thrown him in the Tres Rios jail for six weeks. All in all, life was very pleasant.

He sighed. He still would like to have just one little one.



THE cool of evening had fallen by the time he had made his purchases and left the store. Approaching the hitchrail in front of the How Many, he noticed with surprise that Diablo was no longer there. He frowned, and laid a hand on his gun-butt. Could somebody have stolen his horse?

A sudden lusty roar of pain came from inside the How Many. An angry horse whinnied. Juan froze. That sounded like Diablo. The swinging doors burst open and a white-aproned bartender came sailing through the air. He lit with a *ker-whump* in the dusty street.

"*Por Dios!*" Juan muttered.

Another man tumbled through the door. He lit on his feet, lurched awkwardly about for an instant, then started running as if a thousand devils were after him.

Juan hurried up the saloon steps, prepared for the worst. Suddenly Diablo

pushed his way through the doors. Juan halted. Diablo was very drunk. One ear lifted at a crazy angle; the other drooped listlessly. He held a full bottle of tequilla in his mouth. He cocked an eye at Juan and nickered.

"No, Diablo!" Juan exclaimed, and reached out to seize the bottle. "You must not drink that. We are on the wagon."

Diablo shouldered him aside and lumbered down the saloon steps. Juan followed him, still trying to get a hold of the bottle. He knew what Diablo intended doing. He was intending to break the bottle in the nearby watering trough. Juan cursed himself for ever having taught the horse that trick.

A crowd of interested citizens had gathered. A determined gleam in his eye, Diablo leaned over the watering trough. Juan called for the bystanders to help him, but no one offered assistance. Diablo, when under the influence of alcohol, wasn't to be trifled with, and they knew it.

Juan grabbed Diablo's ear with one hand and the bottle with the other. He jerked violently. Diablo jerked back. Juan's hands slipped. Suddenly he found himself sitting squarely in the middle of the watering trough.

Damp and chilled, he sat dazed for a moment. Diablo broke the bottle of tequilla against the side of the trough and stood gazing contentedly down. He nickered derisively at Juan.

Juan pulled himself out of the trough and stood up, water streaming from his clothes. The odor of tequilla was rank in his nostrils. He shook his head mournfully. That Diablo was one crazy horse.

"So" said an indignant feminine voice at his elbow suddenly, "your promises to me were all lies! You are drunk again!"

Juan whirled. His tongue froze against the roof of his mouth. Rosita stood before him, slim hands on slim hips, dark eyes snapping, red lips pressed in a thin line of anger.

"But Rosita . . ." he started.

"You are a drunken no-good!" Rosita snapped. "You do nothing but sleep and loaf and gamble and race horses and drink."

Juan stared down at his boot-tips. "I

do not drink much," he said weakly.

"What is that I smell on you, then?"

Juan opened his mouth to speak. Rosita slapped it shut.

"It is a lie!"

Juan sighed and shrugged. "But Rosita. . ."

She tossed her head. "The wedding is off. I would never marry such a no-good. You are not satisfied with getting drunk yourself, you have to teach a poor, innocent horse to drink, too."

Juan cast a sideways glance at Diablo. The horse shook his long, bony head reproachfully, then took a deep sip at the contents of the trough. He smacked his lips.

Ignoring Juan, Rosita went to Diablo and patted him gently on the neck. "It is not your fault, Diablo. I will make something out of you. I will take you home with me so that you will not have to associate with this . . . this. . ."

"Lazy, drunken no-good," Juan finished in a small voice.

Rosita nodded. "Come, Diablo," she said.

The horse stared wistfully down at the trough for a moment, then let her lead him away. To Juan, he seemed to weave a bit as he walked.

Juan dropped down on the edge of the boardwalk and let his chin sag into his cupped hands. He did not understand it. How had Diablo managed to untie himself? How had he managed to get drunk so quickly? Why had Rosita come along at such an embarrassing time?

He sighed. Why did everything have to happen to him?

Heavy footsteps sounded on the boardwalk, and he looked up. Sheriff Hoss Perkins was staring down in disapproval, sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Thought you was on the wagon," he grunted.

Juan nodded. "I am."

"Huh!" Sheriff Perkins tugged at one end of his long pendulous ears. "Smells like a brewery around here. Now, you behave yourself, Juan. I don't want to have to throw you in jail again."

The sheriff moved on down the walk and Juan did not answer. His thoughts were bitter. He had behaved as best he could. He had stayed on the wagon. But

now, Rosita had deserted him. Diablo had deserted him. He had not a friend in the world.

He stood up and contemplated the sign hanging above the entrance to the How Many Saloon. Taking off his sombrero, he scratched his head and wondered if his credit was still no-good there.

Señor Roberto came walking by. Juan's eyes gleamed suddenly. He shook Señor Roberto's hand.

"Amigo! I have been waiting for you."

"For me?" Señor Roberto frowned nervously and stared at the gum on Juan's hip. "Have you?"

"Sí. I think I will have that drink now."

Señor Roberto looked at his watch. "I am very busy. I have an appointment."

"Let it wait." Juan put an arm around Señor Roberto's shoulders. "Come, we will have a little one, no?"

Señor Roberto's nervous eyes flickered. "Well," he said weakly, "maybe I would have time for just one small one."



JUAN did not at first know when he woke up the next morning just where he was. His head felt very large. He wondered why those people wearing hob-nailed boots were walking around on it.

Carefully, he opened one eye. He was lying on a hard bunk in a very small room. The room had bars over the window. He groaned. He was in jail—again.

Sitting up with an effort, he tried to piece together what had happened last night. He remembered that he and Señor Roberto had had a drink or two together. Some other gentlemen had come in later and joined the party. And after a while, he and Señor Roberto had started playing some kind of a game.

He couldn't recall what the name of the game was or what the rules were. All he could remember was that you stood in the middle of a room and threw chairs and empty bottles at a little man in a white apron who stood in front of a big polished mirror. He wondered if that was why he was in jail.

Suddenly he heard a groan in the cell next to his and looked through the sepa-

rating bars. Señor Roberto sat on the edge of a bunk, holding his head in his hands.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he was muttering, "My head—she is coming apart!"

"Good morning," Juan said. "What are you doing here?"

Señor Roberto looked up with a scowl. His face was streaked with dirt; it had a slightly greenish tinge. His mustache was limp. His white shirt looked as though it had been used for a mop-rag.

He shook a fist at Juan. "You got me into this! I will see to it that you stay in jail for one hundred years!"

Juan shrugged. So long as they fed him good, he would not mind staying in jail.

Heavy feet clumped down the corridor. Sheriff Hoss Perkins, accompanied by Rosita, stopped in front of Señor Roberto's cell. Rosita's head was held high, her eyes were angry. She would not look at Juan.

Sheriff Perkins stared at Señor Roberto and shook his head sadly. "I always thought you was a gentleman. Never figured I'd have to throw you in jail fer disorderly conduct an' bein' a public menace."

Señor Roberto jerked an accusing thumb in Juan's direction. "I was forced to drink by this . . . this . . ."

"Lazy, drunken no-good," Rosita finished acidly. Juan winced. Rosita turned to the sheriff. "Señor Perkins, it is all Juan's fault. He is a bad influence for everybody. First, it was Diablo. Now it is Señor Roberto. You should let Señor Roberto go."

"Well," Perkins said dubiously, "there was some property damage. . . ."

"I will pay a fine," Señor Roberto broke in. "How much?"

Sheriff Perkins cast an appraising eye at the wallet Señor Roberto took out of his pocket. "Well, I reckon twenty dollars would cover it."

Juan gazed wistfully at the wallet. Money could get a man out of a lot of scrapes. Maybe that was why he was always in trouble. He never had any.

Señor Roberto opened the wallet. Suddenly he looked crestfallen. "I have been robbed!"

Everyone turned accusing eyes on Juan. He shrugged and turned his pockets in-

side out to show their emptiness. "You spent all your money getting drunk last night, Señor Roberto. Remember?"

Señor Roberto shook his head. It was obvious that he didn't remember. Rosita looked from him to Juan for a moment, pursing her lips thoughtfully. Then she unfolded a handkerchief she was carrying and gave the sheriff some bills.

"I will pay the fine. I was saving this to buy some clothes for the wedding. But now. . . ." Her voice broke momentarily. "Now there will be no wedding."

Juan could not speak. Heavy of heart, he stared numbly down at the floor while the sheriff unlocked Señor Roberto's cell. He watched the three of them walk down the corridor. They paused, and Señor Roberto took Rosita's hand and kissed it. She stood talking to him for a moment with rapid, earnest words.

Juan said a bitter curse. He would like to have his hands around Señor Roberto's throat for just one short minute.

The day wore slowly away. Juan sat on the edge of his bunk for hour after long hour, staring vacantly down at the floor. He wondered what Rosita had been talking to Señor Roberto about.



SHERIFF PERKINS came to his cell in the middle of the afternoon. He hunkered down in the corridor outside the bars and rolled a cigarette. "I been thinkin', Juan," he said. "If you'd promise to behave yourself, I might let you out."

Juan shook his head mournfully. "Why should I want to get out?"

Perkins scowled and scratched his head. "First time I ever heard you talk like that. What's wrong—do you feel bad 'cause you've lost your gal?"

Juan shook his head again. "Where is Diablo?" he asked.

"Rosita's takin' care of him. Or was, anyhow."

"Was?" Juan's eyes jerked up. "What do you mean?"

"Nothin'. I just heard her and Señor Roberto talkin'. She was makin' some kind of a deal with him about teaching Diablo to plough."

Juan leaped to his feet and shook the bars with savage hands. "Did you say 'plough'?"

"Yeah. Way I understood it, Señor Roberto was goin' to help Rosita hitch Diablo up to one of his ploughs. Then they was goin' over to your place and plough the west forty."

Por Dios, Juan thought, no one would hitch Diablo to a plough if he could help it! "I have changed my mind," he said suddenly. "I want to get out of jail."

Hoss Perkins stared suspiciously. "Would you promise to behave?"

"I want to get out of jail," Juan repeated. "Unlock the door."

The sheriff took the keys from his pocket. "You got to promise me you won't get drunk."

"I promise."

Sheriff Perkins unlocked the door and swung it open. "An' that you won't go 'round destroyin' property."

"I promise."

The sheriff stepped aside for Juan to pass.

"An' that you won't start trouble."



Juan was silent. He stared down at his boot-tips and said in a low voice, "It would not be *much* trouble?"

Sheriff Perkins scowled, grabbed him by the slack of his shirt front. "What wouldn't be much trouble?"

Juan sighed. "Choking Señor Roberto," he murmured.

Perkins propelled him backward into the cell, swung the door shut, put the keys in his pocket and turned away. "Reckon you better stay here and cool off a while longer."

Feeling a bitter dejection, Juan watched him disappear down the corridor. He should have known, he mused bleakly, that Hoss Perkins would not be broad-minded about this thing.

He sat down on the bunk and tried to think things out. Because he could think better that way, he closed his eyes and laid down. Before long, he was asleep, having a pleasant dream in which he choked Señor Roberto.

A sudden noise awakened him. He got to his feet and stared out the small window. From the window he had a view of the How Many Saloon and a portion of the street which ran past it. People were scrambling madly down the street, away from the saloon. They kept looking back over their shoulders at something Juan could not see.

A clanking noise suddenly came to Juan's ears. He pressed his face against the bars so that he could see better. A dirty gray horse came lumbering down the street and stopped before the saloon. It had a harness on its shoulders; rather, what was left of a harness. On the other end of the harness was a plough.

"*Por Dios!*" Juan breathed. "Diablo!"

Diablo had a wild look in his eyes. Juan didn't blame him. It would make anybody mad to be hitched to a plough. He wondered what had happened to Señor Roberto. Whatever it was, he hoped it was serious.

Diablo snorted and started up the saloon steps, the plough scraping along behind. The point of the share caught on a board in the walk. Diablo gave a mighty heave of his shoulders, then he disappeared into the saloon dragging the plough and a good-sized section of the boardwalk behind him.

Juan smiled wistfully. Diablo had no doubt come to town looking for his master. He had gone first to the How Many, of course. When he discovered Juan wasn't there, he would come to the jail.

While Diablo was still in the saloon, a buggy came clattering down the street. Señor Roberto and Rosita leaped out of it. Señor Roberto looked as if he had been treated roughly.

"He's in there!" Rosita cried, and pointed at the saloon. Go get him!"

◇ ◇ ◇

SEÑOR ROBERTO hesitated. "Perhaps it would be better to wait until he comes out," he said diplomatically. "I would not want him to hurt somebody in the saloon."

"Do not be afraid of one little horse!" Rosita snapped. "Go get him."

Señor Roberto went to the buggy and got a short length of rope. Juan laughed to himself. Did Señor Roberto think he could lasso Diablo like you would a yearling?

Suddenly Diablo reappeared in the doorway of the saloon. Señor Roberto froze. Diablo stood in the doorway for an instant, staring indecisively up and down the street. Then he saw Señor Roberto.

His eyes grew savage. Slowly he moved down the steps, stalking Señor Roberto as a lion stalks its prey.

"Rope him!" Rosita cried.

Señor Roberto was shaking with fear. He made a half hearted toss at Diablo with the rope but it missed. Diablo snorted and kept marching toward him. Señor Roberto turned pale and started backing off.

Juan smiled. He thought he was going to enjoy this.

Señor Roberto retreated step by step across the street, Diablo following remorselessly. Señor Roberto walked faster. So did Diablo. Señor Roberto broke into a run. Diablo began trotting. Señor Roberto tried to escape down the alley between the jail and the building next to it, but Diablo cut him off, backing him into a wall and holding him there.

"Help!" Señor Roberto called weakly. "This horse, he is crazy!"

Juan leaned on the window sill and said, "He is not crazy, señor. He just does not like you."

Señor Roberto's face was white, his eyes were pleading. "Call him off, I beg of you!"

Juan kept smiling pleasantly. Rosita came running up. "Yes, Juan, you must make Diablo stop. He will kill Señor Roberto!"

"Good. That will save me the trouble of doing it."

Sheriff Hoss Perkins, who had heard the commotion, came around the corner. He took in the situation at a glance.

"Now, see here, Juan, you call that nag off."

Juan yawned. "I am very busy right now. Besides, I am in jail."

Diablo reached out suddenly and nipped at Señor Roberto's face. Señor Roberto dodged. Diablo's teeth closed on his sombrero. He munched reflectively on it for a moment, then spat it out. Once again he moved toward Señor Roberto.

"If I were not in jail," Juan volunteered cheerfully, "I might be able to stop him. But I am in jail."

Señor Roberto was very white. Suddenly he began screaming. "It was all my fault! Call him off, Juan, and I will explain everything."

Juan frowned. What could Señor Roberto have to explain?

"Explain first," Juan said. "Then we will see if I should call Diablo off."

Señor Roberto wiped the nervous sweat from his forehead. "I did not want Rosita to marry you," he mumbled. "When I saw you in front of the saloon yesterday, I tried to get you to come in and have a drink with me. I wanted to get you drunk so Rosita would be mad at you."

Juan glanced at Rosita. She was staring intently at Señor Roberto.

"Go on," Juan said.

"So when you would not drink with me, I untied Diablo and got him drunk. I knew he would get you in trouble."

"Then," Rosita broke in, "Juan was not drunk when I saw him sitting in the watering trough?"

Señor Roberto shook his head vigorously. "He had not had a drop."

Rosita turned and looked at Juan. Suddenly she put her face down in her hands

and started crying. "Forgive me, Juanito *mio*—I did not know."

"It is nothing," Juan said. "It is all right."

"I did not want to pay Señor Roberto's fine," Rosita went on brokenly, "but I thought it would teach you a lesson." She turned to Sheriff Perkins. "Put Señor Roberto back in jail and turn Juan loose."

Sheriff Perkins jerked at his long ear. "I don't know if I kin do that. The law book says. . . ."

Rosita stamped her foot. "I do not care what the law book says! You must do as I say!"

Hoss Perkins turned red. "Well, in this case I might make an exception."

Juan smiled. When Rosita made up her mind to something, any man was foolish to argue with her.

Two minutes later Juan was a free man. He had an arm around Rosita and they were walking down the street away from the jail when he heard a shrill scream of pain. He halted.

"*Por Dios!* I forgot Señor Roberto and Diablo!"

Back in the alley, they found Señor Roberto still cornered. Diablo had just nipped the seat of his pants.

"Come, Diablo," Juan said. "You have played enough."

Regretfully, Diablo turned away. The plough was still dragging along behind him. Juan made an imperious gesture at Señor Roberto.

"Unhitch the plough. Diablo does not like it."

Señor Roberto offered no argument. Approaching the horse carefully, he stooped over to unfasten the traces. Diablo nickered, then kicked him across the street. Juan sighed. He should have told Señor Roberto not to stand so close.

He started to unfasten the plough himself. Rosita took his hand. "Not now," she murmured, and kissed him.

Juan smiled. Everything was all right now. Rosita loved him again; loved him so much, in fact, that she could not wait for him to unfasten the plough before she kissed him.

"Not now," she repeated softly as she nestled against him. "You and Diablo still have time to plough several acres on that west forty before dark."

COME AND GET IT,

By FRED GIPSON

CHAPTER ONE

Half-Pint of Hell

IT WASN'T often that Lige Pritchard wished he was back out on Salt Branch riding the pitch out of the boogery ones. Ambition had sunk its

claws deeply into him. It rode him like a hawk. Just recently, he'd got himself elected sheriff of Silver Gap and he felt that he was definitely on the way up. But right now he'd gladly swap his star for a busting saddle and throw in his gun to boot.



Lige Pritchard, bronc-busting half-pint sheriff of Silver Gap, found himself holding the dirty end of the stick when a curly small-gun man from down Santone way robbed the local "bank." But what drove Lige almost loco and set the stage for a Boothill jamboree was that he himself had the crook in jail all the time!

LAW DOG!

A memorable novelette of

Southwest law-trails

He stepped inside Sour Belly Lord's general merchandise store and halted. A frown deepened the crease between his bristling eyebrows. He'd finally raked up enough guts to pick a row with Sour Belly Lord and he wanted to get the job over. But he reckoned it wouldn't be right to jump on the old man in front of a couple of customers.

Especially when one of them was Ma McLaughlin. The life of that hard-bitten

old sister was consecrated to two purposes—snuff-sniffing and scandal-scattering. She ran an eating house for hard-rock miners working for the Silver Gap Mining Company—but that was just a sideline. And a man talking in front of her got about the same results as he would if he shouted his piece from the housetops.

The sheriff dusted off the top of a whiskey barrel and sat down to wait. He



The tough was still slugging,
but wildly.

removed a dove-colored Stetson from his head and carefully wiped out the sweat-band. Nobody would have called the wiry little ex-peeler a cowcamp fashion leader, but it was common knowledge that he took a heap of pride in his clothes.

"Like I was saying," Ma McLaughlin was saying, "Lige Prichard's all right, as far as bronc-twisters go. But if he expects to gentle miners like he does fractious broomtails, he's calculated all wrong. He's due to learn that hardrock miners is hard men. They work hard and they play hard. They're hard gamblers, hard drinkers and hard fighters. They don't just fool around at being tough citizens. They play for keeps."

The rawboned old lady threw back her head and emptied half a can of snuff inside the pocket she made by pulling out her under lip.

"If you ask me," she continued, "I say the voters of this here county got blinded by some fancy pants and a flashy grin. Before this boom's over, they'll be wishing they'd looked closer for some wrinkles on Lige Prichard's horns. There's trouble brewing in Silver Gap, and I ain't just battin' my gums!"

The sheriff's popular grin didn't have a lot of flash to it just then. He felt a sudden urge to sneak out and shed the neat rig he wore. Maybe he was dressed up a little too much, he thought. Still, he'd always held that it was a man's right and duty to show himself off the best his pocketbook could afford.

He shifted uncomfortably on the whiskey barrel and reached unconsciously into a bin for a lump of *piloncillo* to munch.

The hard, suspicious eyes of old Sour Belly Lord caught him in the act. The sheriff hastily withdrew an empty hand and swore under his breath at the guilty flush he felt crawling up his neck. Maybe Ma McLaughlin was right. Maybe he was too young and inexperienced for this sherifing job.

Ma McLaughlin lifted her purchases and looked straight into the sheriff's eyes as she headed for the door.

"Howdy, Sheriff," she greeted as she passed him.

Lige Prichard lifted his hat. "Howdy, Miz McLaughlin," he said.

He wondered why he had to be the one embarrassed by the situation.

The second customer moved up the counter. He called for a sack of Durham. The sheriff looked him over. He saw a ghost of a man with a face the color of goat cheese and the eyes of a cornered rat. Those eyes were not particularly hostile, but there was something loathsome and slimy about them. They kept darting to the back of the store and then looking quickly away, as if the man saw something there he didn't want to be caught looking at.

Lige Prichard's young blue eyes shifted to the back of the store. They widened perceptibly. The door to the storekeeper's safe stood wide open and the sight disclosed was enough to bulge a man's eyeballs. Canvas sacks of gold were piled high inside that safe and the ends of green and yellow bills protruded from every drawer.

The late boom in Silver Gap was too new for the town to have a bank yet. Sour Belly Lord's dilapidated old safe served in that capacity. The hard-fisted storekeeper would keep a man's savings in his safe, free of charge. He also made loans at exorbitant rates to any poor devil hard up for cash. Most of the miners and plenty of cowmen used that old safe for a deposit box. Sometimes it held thousands of dollars. Today was one of those times.

And the safe door stood wide open!

The shifty-eyed man paid for his tobacco and hurried out. Sour Belly Lord turned his icy stare on the sheriff.

"What'll you have, Prichard?" he asked grudgingly.



LIGE PRICHARD'S mouth twisted with a wry grin. He might be sheriff of Silver Gap, but Sour Belly Lord wasn't complimenting him with his title of office. The old storekeeper had been used to swinging a big political stick around town. He'd reared back on his dewclaws from the first and pawed sand in the young twister's face till the last vote was cast. And when Lige Prichard finally rode into office on a wave of popularity, in spite of the opposition, Sour Belly Lord had taken it as a personal insult. He figured he had a grudge against this new lawman and he wasn't backward about showing it.

Lige Prichard said, "Lord, I reckon you'll figure I'm just trying to throw my weight around, but what I really come for was a favor."

The oldster sniffed audibly. "I don't reckon you pack so much weight," he said. "What's the favor?"

"It's about that safe yonder," the sheriff said.

The old man's eyes flashed real hostility now. A quick, nervous old man, Sour Belly Lord was obviously irritated by the sheriff's slow drawl and his round-about approach.

"What about that safe?" he snapped.

"You ought to keep it shut, for one thing," said Lige Prichard. "But mainly, you ought to scrap it and buy a new one!"

The storekeeper jerked down his spectacles and glared at the sheriff over the steel rims.

"So that crippled powder-monkey's sold you on that lame-brained idea, has he?"

"It don't sound so lame-brained to me, Lord," said Lige Prichard. "Like Fire-in-the-Hole says, one stick of dynamite in the right place could blow that old tin can to hell and gone. And this town's getting full of hardrock men who'd know just where to put that stick."

The storekeeper snorted. His seamed face grew red.

"Supposing," he said, "you try running your business as well as I run mine. That old safe's stood there twenty years. The only man who ever tried to blow it wound up in Boothill with a belly full of buckshot. I'll do the worrying about whether that safe's strong enough to hold my money or not."

"That's just the point I come to argue about," the sheriff protested. "All that money *ain't* yours. The life savings of some of these miners and cowmen are in that box. I'm speaking for them."

"Stump speaking for yourself, you mean," the old man sneered. "Done trying to make a big show to get your name on the next election ticket. But you don't make it with me. I fought you this time. I'll fight you the next. And you ain't so broad across the britches that you can't be beat!"

Lige Prichard lifted his right leg and carefully extracted a grassburr from the cuff of his moleskin pants.

"I figured that's about how you'd take

it," he said. "But I still claim that a manganese steel, burglar-proof safe would be a mighty good buy. Times is changing, Lord. The labor turnover is growing bigger all the time, and these new hard-rock men are drifters and boomers. We've got a tougher-looking gang of strangers in town today than I ever saw on payday. You notice that one in here just now?"

"Sure. Sold him a sack of tobacco."

"And gave him a good look at what that old safe holds," added the sheriff. "Notice the color of his face? Notice the way he walked? Sometime or other, not long back, that duck was on the inside, looking out. That was a convict. Or an ex-con."

The old storekeeper smiled contemptuously. "You ought to be on some big city detective force," he said. Then he snapped, "Why didn't you collar him, if he's a convict?"

Lige Prichard ignored that. "Just got a wire this morning from the sheriff at Cross Plains," he said. "He's warning us about that old safe of yours. Claims he got a tip that Cherry Wilson's headed for this Silver Gap boom. Wilson's the yegg who's been pulling them safe-cracking jobs around Santone lately. He's made a tough rep for himself with that two-shot derringer he packs. Bedlow claims Wilson could crack that old safe of yours with a tincan opener. And, right now, it don't look like he'd need even that."

The blast of fury in Sour Belly Lord's eyes was a hard thing to face.

"If Cherry Wilson comes to Silver Gap," he snarled, "it's your job to grab him. That's what you were elected for. To protect us citizens. But if you think you'll crowd me into blowing my money like a drunken cowhand on some fancy safe, you've got another think coming. I'll run my business to suit me and no little lawdog with a big brass collar's going to interfere!"

A familiar thump and shuffle behind him saved Lige Prichard from losing his temper and telling the old man off.



FIRE-IN-THE-HOLE WATKINS came through the door on a pair of crutches. Fire-in-the-Hole had been a powder-monkey for the Silver Gap

Mining Company till he'd got crippled in a mine blast some years back and got let out on a pension. Since that time, he'd been serving successive sheriffs in a clerical capacity. And, in spite of his crippled body, Lige had found him a mighty useful man to have around.

He swept out the jail, cooked for the prisoners, and in a tight could still make a fair showing in a back-to-the-wall fight. He stood now, leaning on his crutches, with a huge, smelly pipe clamped between bared teeth.

"Fire in the hole, Sheriff!" he said. He grinned sardonically. "There's a jasper trying to cut the big hog down in the Green Lizard. The swamper claims he's shooting the place apart and got Booze Sturdivant down on his all-fours rooting a bottle of whiskey around with his nose. That oughtta be a sight worth going to see!"

"Maybe it's Cherry Wilson!" jeered old Sour Belly Lord.

Lige Prichard didn't answer. He hit the main street on the run. It wasn't a long street—about a quarter of a mile. It was blocked on the west by a sprawling mound of black boulders and petered out on the east among the tailing and slag dumps below the riffle house and smelter.

Cowboys yelled good-naturedly at the little sheriff as he sprinted down the street. It was payday and the mine was shut down. The streets were overcrowded with miners and riff-raff boomers. Heavy drinking was in evidence.

Cowhands from all around the neighboring ranches kept together on days like this. They raised their hell in packs, banded together by a mutual distrust of the hardrock men. They left their horses on a tieline in a big clearing a quarter of a mile from town and came straggling into Silver Gap in groups of four, six and a dozen. They all packed guns and they weren't bashful about using them.

The cowboys hurrawed the sheriff and turned to drift with the miners following him. All were eager to see how he proved up.

Booze Sturdivant's Green Lizard was at the end of the street. It was a two-room affair, perched on stilts over the river. One room was a gambling hall, the other the barroom. From the barroom

came time-spaced reports of a heavy six-shooter.

Lige Prichard bounded up the steps and shoved through the gang of men milling around the door. He stepped inside, his hand on his gun.

The barroom looked as if wild horses had stampeded through it. Chairs and tables were overturned. Neat round holes decorated the window panes. Spider web crack-patterns fanned out from each hole. But it was in the back of the barroom where this one-man demonstration of vandalism was most striking. The plate-glass mirror, with its colored soap pictures, was splintered. The shelf below it was a pile of shattered bottles. Rare liquors dripped to the floor, to form puddles with other rare liquors.

And through the puddles came the hog-gish figure of Booze Sturdivant. He was on his all-fours, pushing a bottle of Hill and Hill with his hen-egg nose. The beer-roses of his cheeks were faded. He trembled all over.

With brilliant accuracy, the marauder shot the neck out of the rolling bottle. Liquor gurgled out on the floor. The vandal howled with glee.

"Now lap her up, you boozehound!" he yelped at the pasty-faced Booze Sturdivant. "Lick out that long tongue and lap her up like a dog!"

The gun tough was hatless. His hair was crisp, curly and brown. He wore a silk-striped shirt and bleached ducking pants. High-heeled, bench-made boots fitted his trim feet like gloves.

He blew the curling smoke from the muzzle of his gun and squalled again.

"Yee-oww! I'm a big curly wolf from old Montana, and it's my time to howl! Yee-oww!"

Lige Prichard grinned wryly. He walked up and tapped the curly wolf on the shoulder with a forefinger.

"Who'd you say you was, cowboy?"

The man froze instantly. Cautiously, slowly, he looked around. There was exaggerated, savage cunning in his red-rimmed gray eyes. He caught sight of the nickel star on the sheriff's vest and suddenly the look was gone. A wide mouth with even teeth flashed a friendly smile.

"Aw, hell, Sheriff!" he confided. "I'm

lying. I ain't no big curly wolf. Me, I'm just a li'l ole whimpering coyote pup!"

There was a roar of laughter from the doorway. Lige Prichard's grin widened. "Gimme that gun, then," he commanded.

Without a word, the tough handed over the weapon—then swung with a balled-up fist, squalling a loud "Yee-oww!"

CHAPTER TWO

Mauler From Montana

THE unexpectedness of the blow caught Lige Prichard off guard. The fist caught him under the jaw. He staggered back, rocked to his boot-heels. Then the gun tough was on him, hammering with two heavy fists and squalling with each breath.

The tough was still slugging, but wildly. Suddenly Lige Prichard jerked up a foot. With all his might he drove the spike heel into the other's belly. The wind went out of the man with a loud *woosh*. He stumbled backward, tripped over a table and took it to the floor with him in a splintering crash. He didn't get up.

Not until then did the crowd surge into the room.

"Bud," Lige Prichard said to the swamper, "go get me a bucket of water."

He squatted beside the sharpshooter and examined the man, then the gun he'd taken from him. A miner put his hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"That was a fool thing to do, Lige," the miner said. "Walking up to that monkey without drawing a gun. You oughtta plugged him from the back, in the shooting shoulder, then stepped in. It'd kept your nose from bleeding on that fancy shirt!"

Lige Prichard came to his feet, shoving the hand away. There was wrath in his clear blue eyes.

"Listen, old-timer," he said. "When I want advice, I'll ask for it. I ain't shooting nobody in the back!"

Instantly, he regretted the outburst. He could see that there were others in the crowd who thought he hadn't used his head here. Still, a man didn't need to shoot off his mouth just because a bunch

of hardcases didn't see eye to eye with him.

The swamper returned with the water. The sheriff sloshed it over the unconscious man's face. Booze Sturdivant pawed his way through the men, black wrath in his eyes. His face was flushed with belligerence.

"What I want to know is who's going to pay the damages here?" he demanded. "This barroom's damn nigh ruind. Somebody's going to pay for it!"

He glared at the sheriff. Lige Prichard wondered ironically if Booze Sturdivant expected him to do the paying.

The big curly wolf sat up suddenly, shaking his head and wiping the water out of his face. He grinned at the sheriff again.

"She was a good 'un while she lasted, wasn't she?" he remarked.

Lige Prichard didn't grin back. "What's your name, cowboy?" he wanted to know.

"Bascomb Giles," the cowboy said. "Ain't that a hell of a name?"

"Who you riding for?"

"Me?" said the young man. "I ain't got no job, Sheriff. Ain't got no home. No place to lay my head. Just a pore, lonesome cowboy, Sheriff. Born in Montana and drifting toward death. That's me, Sheriff!"

"What I want to know," interrupted Booze Sturdivant again, "is who's going to pay for the wreckage here!"

Bascomb Giles, who was born in Montana and drifting toward death, had trouble focusing his eyes on the saloon owner.

"Wreckage?" he inquired. "Did we wreck something? What was it and how much was it worth?"

Booze Sturdivant's face was livid with rage. "Five hundred dollars if it's worth a dime!" he roared.

The Montana rover groped for his hip and tugged out a stamped leather billfold. It bulged with yellow bills.

"It was worth it," he said. "To watch you tumble-bug that bottle of Hill and Hill around the floor with your nose was worth that, easy. If there was another bottle left, I'd make it a thousand and watch you do it again."

He peeled off five bills and shoved them toward the saloon owner.

The crowd watched in pop-eyed silence. Booze Sturdivant's jaw hung slack. Suddenly he snatched at the money with a snarl. He turned toward the cash register, still muttering and growling. It was easy to see that he wished he'd asked for a thousand in the first place.

The crowd suddenly howled with delight.



BASCOMB GILES struggled to his feet and stood there swaying. "So long, gents," he said. "I reckon I'll be drifting a piece further toward Boothill." He belched loudly.

"Hold it a minute, Giles," said the sheriff. "Did you kill a man for every notch on this gun?"

Bascomb Giles swayed and belched again.

"Sheriff," he said gravely, "they don't build gun-butts big enough to hold a notch for every man I've gunned down in my time. Now, this particular weapon I taken off a hardcase rustler up in the Big Horn country. Them notches was his kill. With your kind permission, Sheriff, I'll get out of town, now."

"Don't go rushing off," Lige Prichard advised. "Stay a spell. Where'd you come by that bankroll?"

"Friend," said the staggering young man, "that money stands as the proceeds of honest and upright labor, the sweat of my brow, and my luck with riding a pair of galloping bones."

His hand dipped into his pocket and came out, rattling a pair of dice.

"Seven or eleven, Sheriff? What'll she be? You call 'er. I'll roll 'er!"

"I reckon," said Lige Prichard, "a jail floor'd be a mighty good place to try out them dice. Come on!"

"Now, wait a minute, Pretty Pants!" flared the bone-rider. "You can't arrest me without a warrant. Here you see a man standing on his rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Any man who knows the law will back me up."

Several cowmen in the crowd, inspired by all-day drinking, decided it was time to uphold the honor and sanctity of the range. They spoke in no uncertain terms. They claimed the sheriff had no right to

lay a hand on this gent and cause him more trouble.

"Hell's fire, Lige!" pointed out Curly Wheeler. "Booze has done made a two-hundred dollar profit on the bust-up. Who else has got any right to file charges?"

"Forget the charges," said Lige Prichard. "He ain't being arrested. He's just getting a damn firm invitation to pay me a visit till he sober's up. Come on, Giles!"

The vague description of Cherry Wilson that Sheriff Bedlow had wired Lige Prichard that morning could just possibly fit this young wrecker of Booze Sturdivant's barroom. For that matter, the description could fit half the men looking on. But Prichard wasn't taking any chances till he'd had time to check up.

But he wasn't to get out with his reluctant guest without more trouble. As he turned toward the door another cowhand stepped out to confront him. The man was of about the same build as Bascomb Giles, apparently even drunker.

He pushed his big hat back on his head. He fixed the sheriff with a fuzzy-eyed stare and lurched forward. He clutched at the sheriff's shoulder and pulled the lawman toward him.

"Slissen here, Pretty Pants," he began. "You can't lock up this boy. If you lock up this boy I'll flatten your nose. I'll flatten your nose till you have to smell outta your ears!"

"Get out of my way!" Lige Prichard ordered curtly. He shoved the drunk aside. "Come on, Giles."

"No, you don't! No, you don't!" drooled the drunk. "I don't like you, lawdog. I don't like no lawdog with fancy pants!" And with control that was surprising for one so drunk, he suddenly slapped Lige Prichard across the mouth.



FURY had gradually been piling up in Lige Prichard. Now it burst with sudden savagery. With one short, choppy blow he knocked the man half across the room. Before the drunk could get to his feet, Lige Prichard was on him and snapping a steel handcuff to his wrist. He dragged the groggy man to his feet.

"Giles, come here!" he thundered.

The first drunk staggered toward him. Lige Prichard caught the man's wrist and snapped the other ring of the steel bracelets on him. Then he turned to the crowd.

"Now," he said grimly, "I'm making the rest of you boys a little speech. Some of you helped elect me to keep law and order in this county. I aim to do it. Silver Gap has been an easy-going, wide-open town. A mighty good place to drop in on payday and raise a little good-natured hell. It's still like that. But it ain't a town where you can shoot up the saloons, even if you can pay the damage. And its sheriff ain't a man who'll allow his face to get slapped, even if that face ain't so handsome.

"The next man to step out of line here will get a .45 slug where it'll do the most good!"

His reckless blue eyes were puckered now and the light in them was dangerous.

Back in the crowd, some cowpuncher said, "Better call in your dogs, boys. I know that bronc-peeler. When he starts, he's a warthog!"

The crowd opened. Lige Prichard shoved his prisoners out into the street. . .

There were four cells in the Silver Gap jail. They were good old-fashioned brick cells, each with an iron-barred door and an iron-barred window.

Lige Prichard locked one drunk in Number One Cell and the Montana rover in Number Four. He followed the wealthy young man inside. He started to sit down on the cot, but the cowboy beat him to it. He stretched out and grinned back up at the sheriff.

"Still wanna see me roll them bones?" he asked.

"No," said Lige Prichard. "I want to know what town in Montana you're from."

The cowboy grinned wider. "The sheriff's name," he said, "is Jefferson H. Bailey. You can wire him at Miles City."

He turned over and was snoring by the time the sheriff had the cell door locked.

Lige Prichard went out into the street and started toward the mine offices. He had a couple of telegrams to get off. The sudden night of the desert had shut down now. The saloons and gambling halls were

already blazing with lights and humming like bear-raided bee trees. When a man could hear them like that above the noise of the river, he knew that a big payday night in Silver Gap was in full swing.

There'd been a time before the bronc-peeler had been elected sheriff, when he'd enjoyed nights like this. But now he felt as nervous as a cat on ice. It wasn't that he was afraid to lock horns with that tough and ugly crowd of miners and cowhands. It was that he couldn't get that yegg, Cherry Wilson, off his mind. As Sheriff Bedlow had put it, Cherry Wilson was smarter than a den of foxes. And dangerous. Bedlow had said the outlaw was plain poison with that two-barreled derringer of his, but he liked to have all the bulge when he used it.

The telegraph operator was fixing to call it a day when the sheriff stepped into the mine office. The young lawman wrote out a message to the sheriff at Miles City, Montana, asking for information concerning a man named Bascomb Giles. He wrote another to the chief of police in San Antonio, pleading for a better description of Cherry Wilson. He didn't much think either of the men he'd thrown in jail was that outlaw, yet he had to make certain.

The operator told him that the circuit would close in about five minutes and the chances were he couldn't get answers to those wires before morning. The sheriff said all right and strode back down the street. He stopped in at old Crip Liscob's restaurant for a slab of his favorite apple pie, then made it on down to the Green Lizard to watch the games for a couple of hours.

Before he hardly realized what he was doing, he was walking past old Sour Belly Lord's store again. All that money in that old safe worried him. He could picture the trouble he'd run up against trying to corral a man as clever as Cherry Wilson. Him a green country sheriff, and Cherry Wilson a notorious outlaw, famed for the ferocity with which he shot his way out of tight corners.

The store was dark. Lige Prichard wondered why the old storekeeper didn't at least keep an all-night light burning in the back of that store. He reckoned, though, that just the thought of an ex-

pense like that would make the old tightwad bleed internally. The sheriff tried the door. It was locked. But the lock was old. An experienced crook could pick it in a minute.

He went out and stood in the street a while, looking up at the stars. Stars always made him think of the girl. They'd been shining like this the night he'd met her. Star shine had glinted on her shiny black hair while she talked to him in a warm, vibrant voice. There'd been some sort of soft perfume in her hair. . . .

He shrugged. Here he was, letting his mind soar like a hopped-up bindle stiff. He hadn't even managed to find out the girl's name. All he knew was that he'd helped to rescue her and some bigshot mine officials from an overturned stagecoach in the middle of the river. Women like that weren't for men like him.

Lige Prichard wouldn't have confessed it, even to himself, but it was his meeting with this girl that had sobered up a hard-drinking, spur-jingling bronc-peeler and turned him into an ambitious young sheriff. It had taken an unknown girl he never expected to see again to make him realize what little future he had as a bronc-peeler.

He went back down to the Green Lizard and lost ten dollars in a stud game, trying to keep from thinking. Twice his game was interrupted. Once, to quell a free-for-all fist-fight between drunken miners and cowhands down at the Jersey City Bar. The other interruption was to separate a couple of Jake Burleson's percentage girls who were viciously carving each other into scrap meat with razors. They fought over a cowhand too drunk to care who won him. That one took all of his tact and more plain guts than the sheriff had ever realized before that he possessed.

"Sooner try to calm down a couple of thicket sows with a wolf after their pigs," he confessed wryly when he joined the game again.

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Wilson Comes to Town

IT WAS along about three in the morning and the holiday-makers were beginning to curl up in the corners to sleep it off when the sheriff

felt, more than heard, a definite though muffled *thump*.

The sound seemed to come from the earth, not clearly defined, but sufficiently plain to register a slight tap on the sheriff's taut nerves.

He quit the poker table hastily, without a word of explanation. He had his gun out and was running by the time he reached Sour Belly Lord's store. One glance at the door, and he knew that his hunch had been correct. The door stood open some six inches. Inside a dim light glowed in the rear.

Lige Prichard stepped quickly but softly inside. A candle was stuck in a whiskey bottle and was burning beside the safe. The safe door was crumpled and stood open. The safe was empty. A bulging flour sack lay on the floor. And to one side two men struggled silently in the open space between the counters.

One was old Sour-Belly Lord, his cotton nightshirt torn half off his body. The other man wore a black hat and had his face wrapped to his eyes in a red bandanna, hold-up fashion.

Lige Prichard ran forward. The hold-up man suddenly jerked free and snatched a bung starter from the top of a low shelf. He rapped the old man across the head with it. Sour Belly Lord slumped to the floor.

Lige Prichard's quick running strides shook the floor and rattled cans and boxes on the flimsy shelves. He lifted his gun to shoot. The masked man heard him coming and quickly dropped to the floor behind the fallen storekeeper. He brought up a nasty little double-snouted derringer.

"Come and get it, you sneaking law dog!" he called.

Lige Prichard halted, momentarily at a loss. He couldn't shoot for fear of drilling old Sour Belly Lord. He heard the thief's cackling laughter. He sidestepped, hunting cover. Then his world exploded in a fierce and awful blue flame. He felt himself going down with his sixgun bucking spasmodically in his hand. . . .

His return to consciousness was accompanied by a stabbing headache. It was the most intense pain he had ever known. A cool breeze was blowing across his face. He opened his eyes and found himself lying on his side in total darkness.

He put his hand to his head, where the ache seemed the worst, and brought it away, sticky with blood. Evidently he'd been creased, but not too deeply.

After a great struggle with limp and useless muscles, he managed to clutch the top of a show case and pull himself to his knees. Then he heard groans and came to his feet. He listened a while. Then bracing himself against the case, he staggered back toward the safe. Finally, he was able to strike a match. He located the candle, still stuck in the neck of the

don't you do something! Why don't you do something!"

"Shut up, Lord," Prichard commanded harshly. "Shut up and get on your feet. You've got to stand off a bunch of sight-seers here till I can round up a posse."

The old man broke under that and started whimpering.

"Why don't you say something about my old safe?" he blubbered. "Go on and tell me I ought to have bought a new one!"

He came to his feet with a grunt, then

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whiskey bottle, and stuck his match to the wick.

Sour Belly Lord lay there on the floor. His head was a bloody mess and there was a bullet hole in his leg. The thief was gone. The flour sack was gone. The safe stood gutted of its contents.

Gradually the strength flowed back into Lige Prichard's muscles. Blood seeped down from his temple and ran into his right eye. He wiped it out and swore. He hunted up more candles and lighted them. He stuck them around on the safe and on the floor. He found a cedar bucket of drinking water hanging from a chain attached to the ceiling joists. He emptied it over the old man. There was a lump the size of a man's fist on the back of Sour Belly's head where the bung starter had struck.

The old man gasped when the water hit him and struggled to sit up. Lige Prichard helped him.

It was characteristic of the storekeeper that his first thought was of his money.

"Did he get away with my money?" he gasped.

"Looks like he taken every cent," said Lige Prichard.

"He got away!" the old man cried in terror. "You let him get away with my money. You didn't try to stop him!" He beat on the floor with his fist. "Why

swayed. "I've been shot in the leg!" he groaned, sinking down again. "I've been robbed and shot in the leg!"

♦ ♦ ♦

LIGE PRICHARD remembered how his gun had been bucking in his hand as he'd gone down. He turned and left the old man on the floor. He didn't have the strength to stand and face Sour Belly Lord when the belligerent old storekeeper came to his senses and realized that it was the sheriff who'd shot him.

He could hear the old man raging as he left. "Posse!" Sour Belly was saying. "What good will it do to organize a posse? Better than a thousand men coming and going here tonight. All strangers and all raising hell. How'll a posse know who to look for?"

That's what was bothering Prichard as he made his way dizzily toward the Green Lizard. How would a posse know who to look for? How would anybody know who to look for? He and old Sour Belly had been out for ten or fifteen minutes. Maybe longer. The thief had had plenty of time to walk calmly down to the line, mount his horse, and ride away. Or would he ride away? Maybe he'd hide his loot

and stay right here in town, knowing what the sheriff was up against.

The sheriff's aching head was floating off in a hazy fog by the time he reached the jail. He was forced to sit down there and rest a moment. When his head had cleared again, he stepped inside the jail. He lit a match. Both prisoners lay on their cots, snoring away. He hit out for the Green Lizard again, thankful that he didn't have a jailbreak to contend with, on top of this other.

The posse wasn't much, after it was organized. Its members were too drunk. But Prichard found one sober cowboy to lead it and felt some better. Blaze Ferguson was a shrewd man and had served on manhunts before.

"Blaze," said the sheriff, "you know about as well where to look as I do. I'll stay here and look the outfit over better for clues. All the description I can give of this safe-cracker is that he wore a black hat, a white shirt and ducking pants. About the same rig that Montana rambler I locked up before dark had on."

"Sure it wasn't him?" Ferguson hurried.

The sheriff's mouth twisted in a humorless grin. "Nope," he said. "Our friend Bascomb Giles is still dreaming. Just looked in on him. The man we're hunting is packing a flour sack full of loot and a mighty deadly pee-wee gun."

"He can't hide that sack on no horse," declared one of the riders.

Back at Sour Belly Lord's store, the sheriff placed two men at the door to hold back the crowd of curiosity seekers who'd followed him from the Green Lizard. He ordered them to let no one inside, then began his search.

Fire-in-the-Hole Watkins came hobbling in on the strength of his crutches and poison pipe he sucked. It was Fire-in-the-Hole who picked up a small wooden box behind the safe. Inside the box were two sticks of dynamite, each wrapped in parafin paper.

"Look here, Lige," said Fire-in-the-Hole. "This bird was a good dynamite man, but he was careless. Look at them caps laying loose beside that dynamite. Nobody but a reckless damn fool would leave detonator caps in the same box with his dynamite!"

That didn't mean much to Lige Prichard. But he hoped Fire-in-the-Hole was right. If Cherry Wilson was careless in one way, he might be careless in another. He searched more closely. At the door he came upon another clue. Just outside, on the steps, lay a short piece of bright steel wire. He picked it up. It was stiff, and one end had been bent at right angles.

"That's what he picked the door lock with," Fire-in-the-Hole declared. "We'll get that duck, Sheriff!"

Lige Prichard didn't see how. Granted that the safe-blower had been careless in leaving such things around, just how did a man use them to apprehend the criminal? The sheriff didn't know, and old Sour Belly Lord kept hanging around worrying him with moans and groans about his losses.

"I'm ruind," Sour Belly Lord kept whining. "Ever' cent I got gone, and me an old man, not able to start over again. Why don't somebody get out and try to get my money back?"

Not a word did he mention about the losses of others who had entrusted him with their entire savings.

He kept it up till Prichard was secretly glad he'd shot the storekeeper in the leg. But still, he hoped the old devil didn't ever figure out who did it.

Fire-in-the-Hole finally pulled him off into a dark corner. "How do you figure it, Lige?" he asked.

"Between me'n you and that old busted safe," Lige Prichard admitted, "I ain't got it figured."

"Well, look," the powder monkey said. "This bird didn't just ride into town and crack this safe accidentally. He came in and looked it over. Or somebody come and looked it over for him. And you can bet he figured his getaway just as close as he figured the rest. He's playin' it safe, all the way."

The sheriff thought of the rat-eyed convict he'd caught eying the old safe that evening.

"You're right, I reckon, powder man," he admitted. "And that being the case, he ain't never left town yet."

"Course he ain't," Fire-in-the-Hole said. "He's smart as a sheep-killing dog. He figured on searching parties. He

knows this town's full of strange faces. He knows he can hide that loot and set around and laugh till you've rode down every hoss in the country, trying to cut his sign in the hills."

"But what have we got to work on," the sheriff queried, "once you boil it right down to the bones."

"His carelessness," said Fire-in-the-Hole. "He'll hang around here till he laughs at the wrong time. Or let slip something he hadn't oughtta. We just got to keep our eyes open, that's all."



LIGE PRICHARD reckoned he'd do that, all right, but he wished to hell he knew what to look for. Sour Belly Lord limped over to stick his bespectacled nose into the whispered conference.

He said belligerently, "You ain't fooling nobody with all these secret palavers, Prichard. You're up a tree and you don't know which way to jump. I reckon I've lost everything I've got, but this'll ruin you as a sheriff!"

Lige Prichard was tempted to shoot the old man in the leg again. But he had to admit that Sour Belly Lord was right. This would ruin him politically. The news of the robbery and of his ineffectual attempt to apprehend the criminal would be all over Texas before tomorrow night. The news would flash from ranch to mine to timber camp until the loneliest prospector would know of the grim joke that an outlaw had played on the shorthorn sheriff of Brewster County.

This knowledge didn't help to ease the cruel steady throb in the sheriff's head. By rights, he should have gone to bed and stayed there, but he couldn't do it. He prowled the streets and mine dumps all night long, searching, and not knowing what to search for.

Among the miners and some of the cowmen the consensus of opinion was that the sheriff had been too slow with his gun to get his man. They figured that from the way he'd let that Montana rover get the jump on him and beat him up. They all claimed the sheriff ought to have been shooting when the outlaw downed old Sour Belly Lord. And some were begin-

ning to wonder how come the old storekeeper got shot in the calf of the leg by a man with a bung starter in his hand.

Young Sheriff Lige Prichard reckoned this sherifing business wasn't all fur-lined. A bronc-buster now—he could sleep of a night, with nothing on his mind but maybe a pretty girl.

He kept on the prowl.

Seemed like half the men he saw could easily fit the description Sheriff Bedlow had given him of Cherry Wilson. Brown hair, blue eyes, cowboy clothes. All over town and all down the line where the cowboys tied their horses out of town, the sheriff ran into men who answered that vague description. Sheriff Lige Prichard groaned, and it wasn't from the pain in his head.

Daylight found him sitting at his desk, staring with red-rimmed eyes at a crack in the floor.

Fire-in-the-Hole Watkins hobbled in with a basket dangling from one crutch and that confounded pipe fouling the air.

"How's it coming, Lige?" he asked.

"I reckon," said Lige Prichard, "Sour Belly called the turn. Looks like I'm treed, powder man."

"The trouble with you, Lige," declared Fire-in-the-Hole, "is that you try to work with too short a fuse. Take your time. Sample a cup of this bellywash coffee I've brung in to sober up our cell guests on. Then forget the whole damn thing for a spell. We'll get him!"

The sheriff drank his coffee, but he couldn't forget. They'd be coming in soon. People who'd lost their money in that old safe. Some raising hell because he hadn't recovered it. Others, the ones who'd be hurt worst by the loss, saying little but looking old and beaten and heartsick.

Fire-in-the-Hole came out with a grin on his face.

"For a couple of downright remorseful hangovers," he said, "I never seen the beat of them two in yonder. And they're surprised all to hell about waking up behind the cold prison bars. They can't recollect a thing they done last night to deserve this rank injustice. The Montana man, he's begging for a little horn to set him back on his props and the other duck claims if he's ever caught looking up

the side of a bottle again he hopes they cut his throat from ear to ear."

Lige Prichard's grin was feeble. He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle.

"Give them a little hair of the dog," he said. "I know how they feel."

While Fire-in-the-Hole was gone on his errand of mercy, the mining company's telegraph operator came in with a message.

"Wire from Miles City," he said. "Haven't heard a thing from San Antonio yet!"

The sheriff took the message and read:

BASCOMB GILES WELL KNOWN
HERE SIX FEET BLUE EYES LIGHT
BROWN HAIR STOP SON OF
WEALTHY RANCHER HERE STOP
OWNS INTEREST IN SILVER GAP
MINING COMPANY THERE STOP
HABIT OF SHOOTING UP BAR-
ROOM SCENERY WHEN DRUNK
STOP IF BROKE FAMILY WILL PAY
FINE AND DAMAGES STOP SISTER
DEMANDS HE RETURN PAIR OF
GOLD MOUNTED CHIHUAHUA
SPURS HE STOLE FROM HER HOPE
CHEST REGARDS

JEFFERSON H BAILEY SHERIFF

Lige Prichard sighed. He got up and let himself into the Number One cell.

The man who had slapped his face was struggling into a pair of boots. He looked up and grinned feebly at the Silver Gap sheriff.

"What's your name, cowboy?" Lige Prichard wanted to know.

"Van Pilcher."

"Cowhand?"

"Hoss wrangler," the man said. "Out of a job."

"Where's your horse?"

"Tied down the line somewhere, if he ain't been stole!"

"You ride out to Salt Branch and see Ples Williams," instructed the sheriff. "Foreman for the Bar-20 where I used to work. He might sign you on. But don't try slapping Ples's face, drunk or sober. Ples is a good man, and I don't wanta have to lock him up on no murder charge. Pay Fire-in-the-Hole for your breakfast and get out of town!"

The man who called himself Van Pilcher got a grip on his hanger and lurched out into the blinding sunlight.

CHAPTER FOUR

Half-Pint Payoff

THE sheriff went to cell Number Four. Bascomb Giles sat in the middle of the floor banking his dice against the brick wall and nibbling the sheriff's bottle to take the raw edge off his nerves.

"Snake eyes!" he said in disgust and looked up at the sheriff.

"Giles," said the sheriff, "if you've lost those gold mounted spurs, you're in a hell of a jam!"

The man from Montana stared slack-jawed at the sheriff a moment, then reached for the cubes.

"Now look, Sheriff," he complained. "There ain't no female woman got the right to ride the gallopin' bones in the grand style my sister Johnnie does. I teach her all the tricks of the cubes, then she takes 'em and wins them spurs off me. You call that square?"

The sheriff chuckled. "But stealing them out of a girl's hope chest, Giles. That's biting off trouble in mighty big chunks, I'd say. Girls ain't reasonable about things like hope chests."

"What you mean is," said Bascomb Giles, "girls ain't reasonable."

"Maybe you're right, at that," said the sheriff with a grin. "But I reckon if you'll promise to send them spurs back, you can go."

"Let's drink on it!" invited Bascomb Giles, holding up the sheriff's bottle. "My head hangs in shame. I'll send them spurs right back."

He tipped the bottle to his own lips first and drank like a thirsty man drinks water. He left barely a swallow.

Lige Prichard said, "I see you don't aim to let me throw a drunk this morning!"

The Montana rover gravely advised the sheriff never to drink heavy before dinner-time, then added, "What was all the coming and going about last night?"

Lige Prichard's smile died out. Briefly, almost curtly, he told the cowboy about the robbery.

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Bascomb Giles. "What was you doing? Locking up suspects?"

The sheriff told him he'd looked in a couple of times after the robbery to make sure there hadn't been a jail break.

"About half-way had you figured for the criminal," he chuckled bitterly.

The cowboy turned up the bottle and drained it. "Hope you can run him down, Sheriff. I still ain't figured out how a little man like you ever throwed me in jail without help. How about my gun? Do I get it?"

The sheriff returned the man's revolver. They shook hands and wished each other luck. Lige Prichard sort of hated to see the other go. There was something about the good-natured recklessness of this man that he liked. And there was something about his eyes that kept reminding the sheriff of the Girl.

The sheriff grimaced. What business had he thinking of any kind of a girl? He'd just given up a bronc-peeler's job for the sheriff office and was fixing to lose that. A hell of a shine he'd cut before a girl. A two-bit law dog like him. . . .

The sheriff had sat down to worry again, but now he suddenly leaped to his feet. *Law dog!* That was it. "*I don't like law dogs!*" "*Come and get it, you sneaking law dog!*" And that idle question of Bascomb Giles' about all that coming and going in the jail last night. Hell! That had to be it!

Lige Prichard kicked over a chair in his haste to get out of the room. He ran into the empty jail. In the open doorway of Number One cell he stopped. He looked in, looked all over the floor. He went to the cot and jerked off the faded folded blanket. Strips had been torn from one ragged end. And on the opposite corner were splotches of dried blood. Some time during the night Van Pilcher had bound up a wound.

"Old Sour Belly wasn't the only man I shot last night!" he said to himself.

He searched the floor again, his nerves humming with urgency. He kicked through a scattering of cigarette butts. There was a scraping ring between his boot and the concrete floor. He bent down and snatched up what he hadn't even dared hope he'd find. A short piece of stiff steel wire, one end crooked at right angles. There'd also been a second door lock picked that night!

LIGE PRICHARD hit the street, running fast. That outlaw hadn't been so drunk. He'd had sense enough to slap a sheriff's jaws and get put in jail. Fifty men had seen him slap Lige Prichard's face and get thrown into jail for his trouble. He had himself an air-tight alibi, with plenty of witnesses.

No wonder Cherry Wilson had jeered at him. What a fast one he'd pulled on a green sheriff! Getting himself thrown in jail so he could take his time and do that safe job right. The outlaw would spread that story from the Rio Grande to the Canadian line. "Did you hear about the time that Silver Gap sheriff let Cherry Wilson out of jail and tried to put him next to a hoss wrangling job?"

Lige Prichard began to see red. "I'll kill him!" he muttered under his breath. "I'll kill that hound on sight!"

He called ahead to a group of men. "You see that bird I just turned out? The one that slapped my face last night?"

"Just went down the street, Sheriff!" "Seen him heading for the tie-line a minute ago. What's up?"

Lige Prichard swung down the slope toward the tie-line without answering, still running.

"*Come and get it, you sneaking law dog!*" The words kept hammering inside his head.

Lige Prichard was coming to get it. He had his mind made up about that!

"Hey, Sheriff!"

It was the Montana rover. He swung out of a crowd and started after Lige Prichard.

"Hold up, Sheriff!" Bascomb Giles called. "Why didn't you tell me your name is Lige Prichard? I got business with a bronc-peeler by that name!"

"It'll have to wait!" the little sheriff snapped.

The Montana cowboy wasn't waiting, however. He lengthened his stride, closing the gap between them.

"This is important, Sheriff!" he called.

"It'll keep," Lige Prichard said, and kept running.

At the tie-line, he found a cowhand he knew trying to set a kak on a wild-eyed bronc with rollers in his nose.

"You seen that jasper I throwed in jail last night?" he asked hurriedly.

"What's that trying to run you down?" inquired the cowhand with a grin. "Or am I still drunk?"

Lige Prichard glanced over his shoulder. Bascomb Giles was still coming.

"I mean the other one," Prichard said. "The one that slapped my face!"

"He ain't been here in the last ten minutes," said the cowhand. "I've been fighting this boogery jug-head bay that long!"

"He doubled back on you somewhere, Sheriff," said Bascomb Giles. "We'll like-ly jump him back of them slag dumps."

The sheriff glanced up the steep slope of a slag dump that spilled down the hillside from the refinery. In the cinders which had drifted over the broken lumps he saw regularly spaced, new footprints.

He started toward the tracks. Bascomb Giles set a pace to equal his. Lige Prichard said, "You keep out of this, Curly Wolf. This is a personal defalgaty."

"It was," puffed Bascomb Giles, "till I learnt you was a reformed bronc-stomper by the name of Lige Prichard. Now it's a family row and I'm in it up to my ears. You locate this bird you want shot and watch me pick him off."

Lige Prichard had started up the dump. He was thinking, "A smart man who knows mining could foller up that old scaffolding leading to one of those old drifts behind the smelter and come out on top. If he had a horse staked there, he'd soon be long time gone!"

Down in the path beside the dump a group of men were collecting, attracted by the running figures. One called up, "Lige! You after that safe robber? You want help?"

The sheriff called back over his shoulder. "Better keep out of this. It's Cherry Wilson!"

He clawed his way to the top of the steep slope and looked over. He saw the flash of a man leaping from the top of one small slag pile to the other, right up under the pilings that braced the refinery building. The running man carried a lumpy white flour sack over one shoulder.

Bascomb Giles yelled in eagerness. "Get out your whittling knife, Sheriff! We're fixing to notch this old gun again!"

He aimed and fired. Dust spurted between the running man's feet.

CHERRY WILSON whirled with the agility of a cat. And the gun he brought into play wasn't his derringier this time. It was a long-barreled .45 that rocked high in his hand when he fired.

Lige Prichard heard the impact of the lead as it struck Bascomb Giles. Hit high in the shoulder, the curly wolf from Montana pitched backwards with a squall.

"The yellow-bellied dog!" he roared, rolling down the slant. "He shot me!"

Lige Prichard's foot slipped as he fired. His bullet went wild. Cherry Wilson's second shot burnt an ugly streak across the sheriff's dove-colored Stetson. The sheriff stumbled and went to his knees. The crowd below yelled, thinking he'd been cut down. Behind him, he could hear Bascomb Giles climbing the slope again.

Firmly braced at last, Lige Prichard raised his gun and sighted with what looked like suicidal deliberation. He fired.

The outlaw staggered. His gun hand lowered slowly, as if the weight of the weapon was too much. Then beside the sheriff a sixgun crashed. Cherry Wilson pitched forward on his face and began a slow slide down the dump. The flour sack started rolling, bounced out of sight.

Bascomb Giles blew the smoke out of his gun barrel. "I'll bet you that we've broke that hound dog from sucking eggs!"

Then he sat back and started tearing up his shirt to staunch the flow of blood from an ugly wound through the thick part of his left shoulder.

The sheriff laid down his gun to help him.

The excited crowd below struggled up the dumps, some toward the dead outlaw, the rest toward the sheriff and his wounded partner. Old rawboned Ma McLaughlin, her under lip bulging with snuff, was leading the bunch. Events had to move fast to keep ahead of Ma.

"If you'd stayed out of this fracas like I warned you," Lige Prichard told the wounded cowboy, "you wouldn't have got all shot up."

"If I hadn't horned in on this," growled Bascomb Giles, "Johnnie would have raised more hell than you could crowd into a wagon box. You don't know that gal, little law man. You don't know what you let yourself in for when you rode her

to dry land out of that busted-down stage in the river below town. Before she gets through with you, you'll be tied hand and foot. She'll have you buying grub with your last dime when there ain't a drop of decent drinking whiskey in the house!"

Things were coming just a little too fast for Lige Prichard. "Just what in the hell," he wanted to know, "are you talking about, cowboy?"

"What I'm talking about is my sister Johnnie," said Bascomb Giles with obvious irritation. "She sent me down here plumb from Miles City for you. She told me to come down and look up a little twist of rawhide named Lige Prichard that rode broncs for the Bar-20 out on Salt Branch. She says to me: 'Bascomb, there's a little bronc-buster down at Silver Gap with a grin that weakens my knees. You go down there and look him up and if he's any kind of a man, you bring him back to Miles City. I want him.' And brother, what Johnnie Giles wants, she gets. Get this shoulder fixed up so you can catch that noon train out of town. The gent that can throw Bascomb Giles in jail single-handed is all man!"

Lige Prichard sat there on top of the slag dump and fingered the bullet burn across his dove-colored Stetson. He watched with unseeing eyes the crowd milling around the dead outlaw. His

heart was kicking up like a bronc under its first saddle.

A voice called from the slag dump just below the refinery. "Hey, Sheriff! What'll we do with that outlaw's body till we can get an undertaker?"

"Go get orders from Fire-in-the-Hole!" called Bascomb Giles. "The little law man's got a rush call to Miles City!"

"Now wait a minute!" exclaimed the stunned Lige Prichard.

"Wait, hell!" said Bascomb Giles. "You want me to go down and shoot up another barroom?"

"No," gulped the sheriff, "but I—"

"All right," said Bascomb Giles. "You better get me out of town in a hurry, then. I feel a shooting urge coming on!"

The sheriff stared around him, like a blind man seeing for the first time.

"As I was saying," he heard Ma McLaughlin saying, "you take a little old tough bronc-peeler like Lige Prichard now. He's a hard 'un to shave. And I ain't just battin' my gums!"

The sheriff looked at Bascomb Giles and grinned sheepishly. "All right, gun tough," he said. "Let's catch that train!"

Bascomb Giles followed Lige Prichard down off the slag dump. "She'll play hell getting them spurs back," he muttered grimly to himself. "That gal's fixing to learn something!"

THE END



ALL-STAR OLD-TIMERS' ISSUE!

Here it is—that "Old-Timers'" issue of *Adventure* you've been waiting for! And we can promise you it all adds up to 130 stirring, action-packed pages, when these toptotch yarn-spinners get together again on our February contents page! Take a look at the line-up—

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Lodestar's Amateur Lawman

★ ★ ★

By L. P. HOLMES



"Think again," Cappy said coldly. "You can't come in here and threaten me. Get out and stay out."

Mild, honest Cappy Daniels tried his hand at turning the course of Lodestar history, when he bet his last chip on a condemned murderer's tip—and took his chances at spending the rest of his life behind bars. . .

THERE had been a storm up among the higher peaks of the Grindstones and it had left snow behind it. And now the wind, whining and dragging about the corners of the old station house, had the breath of that snow in it, and was as frigid as the pit.

Cappy Daniels listened to the distant, lonely wail of the whistle of the approaching freight and laid another shovel of coal into the glowing pot-bellied heater. He lifted the lid of the coffee pot on the heater and sniffed the steaming fragrance. The freight was bringing in ten cattle empties

for Lear Bradshaw, which meant there would be a chore of switching. And Bill Rawn, the freight conductor, would be in for a couple of cups of that coffee.

Cappy heard the freight slow down for the east end of the siding, and stop. Then the station house trembled as the big Mallet freight hog rumbled past on pounding drivers. The door opened and Bill Rawn popped in, coated to the eyes, swinging his lantern.

Cappy poured a cup of java and held it out. Bill Rawn grinned. "I was hoping, Cappy. Br-r-r! What a night!"

Cappy chuckled. "Don't know why I baby you like I do."

Old friends, these two had given the best part of their lives to faithful service with the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Bill Rawn backed up to the stove and sipped his coffee in huge satisfaction.

"What's new?" Cappy asked.

"Not a thing," replied Rawn. "Except I heard they'd had a prison break at Deerfoot. Happened yesterday evening. Funny thing about Deerfoot. Coming over the backbone at night you can see the lights of the place. I've often wondered how many people who see those lights ever stop to think about the men inside the walls. What those men are thinking, how they feel. Most of them in there are lifers, you know."

"Me," said kindly Cappy, "I don't like to think of it. Too bad there are some men so constituted they can't get along with the rest of the world. But it is part of life, I reckon."

Rawn drained his cup, picked up his lantern. "See you Thursday, Cappy. Tell Lear Bradshaw to have his damned cows loaded and ready to roll, this trip. I ain't going to wait a damned minute for him, like I did last time. He put me a full half hour late into Division and I took a calling down for it."

Cappy went out to the platform with Bill Rawn. The Mallet had spotted the empties and was now rolling back along the main drag to pick up the through haul. Rawn hooked on to the caboose. A minute later the freight was lining out into the western night.

A gust of wind tore at Cappy's sheepskin. He hurried back inside, where he came to a surprised dead stop. For there,

sidling up against his stove, was the gaunt and shivering figure of a man—a man in faded jeans and jumper. Across each thigh and between the shivering shoulders was a patch of dirty white cloth carrying a stenciled number. Like a thunder clap there returned to Cappy the news Bill Rawn had given him about the prison break at Deerfoot.

Cappy said sternly, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" As he spoke, he sidled over toward his old dispatcher's desk.

A bitter grin twisted the face of the man by the stove. "You don't need a gun, Cappy. I knew that Deerfoot could grind the soul of a man. But I didn't know that in four years it could change him so much an old friend wouldn't recognize him."

Something clicked in Cappy's brain like the tinkle of a bell. "Greg!" he exclaimed. "Greg Bruce! You—"

"I could stand a cup of that coffee," said the convict.

Cappy filled a cup for him and the man gulped the steaming beverage ravenously. "Lord, that's good!" he said softly.

Cappy was up in the air. He didn't know just what to do. Instinct made him draw the shades of the windows and turn the bolt in the door. He said, almost apologetically, "I ain't trying to lock you in, Greg. How—where'd you come from?"

"Came in on that freight. I hooked on while it was rolling slow, just short of the summit. I'd been hiding out in a patch of mesquite. Any more coffee in that pot?"

Cappy filled the cup again. He was thinking a little more clearly. "Greg, you ain't got a chance."

"You're wrong, Cappy. I got one chance—just one. It's awful thin—but a chance. I'm gambling everything on it. If it works, I'm a free man. If it don't—well—" He shrugged fatalistically and downed some more of the coffee.

Cappy waited, watching him, knowing a queer, deep pity at the pinched, hunted, desperate lines of this man's face. Presently Greg Bruce spoke again. "Just one man can help me. That's you, Cappy."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you, Cappy. I'm asking you for help. But if you ain't interested, well, that's all right. I'll throw up the whole ticket."

Cappy was frowning, thinking. He remembered Greg Bruce back in the old days. A young, clean-cut rancher, with all the world at his feet. Well liked—well thought of. He'd been fond of Greg Bruce. Then that shooting scrape, when Monk Harvey was killed—

"I can't see what I can do for you, Greg," Cappy said slowly. "But I'll listen."



LUKE FERRIS, Sheriff of Lodestar County, woke to a hammering on his office door. Luke had got in late that night and was bunking on the cot in his office. He shivered as he fumbled for a match and got his little kerosene lamp to going.

"All right—all right!" he yelled crankily. "I'm a-comin'. You don't need to batter the door down."

When Luke opened the door, Cappy Daniels came in, his white hair wind-whipped, his cheeks ruddy. Luke grunted. "You damned old fool! What you doing ramming around this time of night—and on such a night? Come on in. That cussed wind must be coming from the North Pole. What's on your mind?"

"Telegram for you, Luke," Cappy said. "Just came in over the wire."

The sheriff took the yellow rectangle of paper, held it close to the lamp and spelled out the words with moving lips. He blinked, his eyes sharpening. "Humm! Prison break at Deerfoot, eh? And one that got away was Greg Bruce. I'll be damned! They seem to think Greg might head back for his old stamping ground. He wouldn't be that simple. This could have waited for daylight, Cappy."

Cappy grinned. "You're getting old and cranky, Luke. Notice that last word. Urgent. That means right now, in my book. I've done my duty. Rest is up to you."

By mid-morning the next day, word was all over the town of Iron Mountain. Before sundown it had spread to the surrounding range. Incidents surrounding the killing of Monk Harvey and the subsequent arrest, trial and conviction of Greg Bruce were recalled, freshened up and discussed. It was the lone topic along

the street, on the benches under the cottonwoods around the courthouse, and in the various bars.

It was still the main item of interest when Lear Bradshaw brought his shipping herd in to the corrals and loading chutes along the railroad siding. Bradshaw, stocky and bull-chested, with a square, stubborn face, swaggered as he went over to the station house at a rolling walk. Big medicine in the ranks of the cattlemen on the Iron Mountain range was Lear Bradshaw. He valued his own opinion and expected others to do the same.

"Where's the engine to spot those cars for us, Daniels?" he demanded.

Cappy shrugged. "Ain't none. Your crew will have to do that with pinch bars. And you better be all loaded by dark, Lear. Because when Bill Rawn comes through on Twenty-eight, he ain't going to wait like he did last time. Bill said to tell you that, which I'm doing."

Lear Bradshaw reared back on his heels. Folks didn't usually talk that way to him. His truculence was two-thirds bluster. "I ship more cows on this railroad than anybody else in these parts. And if this railroad expects to keep my business, it better—"

"When you can find some place closer for you to ship over, let me know, Lear," Cappy broke in curtly. "I hadn't heard of any other railroad being built in this neck of the woods."

Cappy sure had him there, and Bradshaw knew it. "All right," growled the cattleman. "Trot out those pinch bars."

Half an hour later Cappy had another visitor. It was Dene Bradshaw, who had come into town with her father and the shipping herd. A pretty girl, Dene Bradshaw, in a quiet, sober sort of way. Cappy, who had known her since she was a little girl, was cheery.

"Nice of you to visit me, Dene. You grow easier on an old man's eyes all the time."

She gave him her slow, grave smile, but there was a solemn question in her eyes. "That—that prison break at Deerfoot. Have you heard any more about it, Cappy? I mean—whether they have recaptured any of the—the escaped men?"

"Heard from Bob Suey at White River

just before you came along," said Cappy. "They've captured all but one. Greg Bruce is still on the loose."

The girl swung around and stared out of a window. Her voice was a little thick as she thanked him and left the station.

Cappy saw this was going to be a morning of visitors, for as Dene Bradshaw headed back up town, she passed Luke Ferris and Pierce Tenny coming out. Pierce Tenny paused as though to speak to the girl, but she passed by with only the vaguest of nods.

Cappy murmured, "Trust a good woman's instinct."

"Thought you might have picked up some more news on that prison break," Cappy," said Luke Ferris as he and Pierce Tenny came up.

"Did," Cappy announced. "From White River. They've rounded up all the jailbirds but Greg Bruce, Luke."

"Does Dene Bradshaw know that?" asked Pierce Tenny.

"Yeah," Cappy admitted. "Just told her."

Tenny scowled out a window. A big man, Pierce Tenny, with a hard, aggressive face and calculating black eyes. He ran the range next to Lear Bradshaw's Rolling B. Next to Bradshaw he was probably the most prosperous ranchman around.

"So Greg Bruce gave 'em the slip, eh," mused Luke Ferris. "No fool, that boy. Should he locate himself a bronc and hit for the Grindstones, he's liable never to be caught. Greg is trail-wise and the Grindstone country is mighty big and wild and rough."

"Me," said Cappy calmly, "I hope they never do catch Greg."

Pierce Tenny swung around. "That's a hell of an opinion for a man like you to have, Daniels. Or maybe you like killers. What's yore angle?"

"I got no more use for a killer than the next man," said Cappy. "The point is, I never did believe that Greg Bruce killed Monk Harvey. And I don't now."

Tenny's laugh was scoffing. "You've lived too long alone. You're simple. The case was air-tight. If the jury hadn't been soft-headed, they'd have called for the noose instead of life imprisonment. Now Bruce is on the loose again and may cause

a heap of trouble before they nail his hide up to dry."

"I hope he does," Cappy said bluntly. "I hope Greg smokes a lot of coyotes into the open."

"Lucky we ain't all as soft-headed as you," growled Tenny. "Luke, you better get some posses to riding, checking up on the trails. Me and my outfit will help."

Luke Ferris shook his head. "No use riding the legs off a bunch of brones, chasing blind. If Greg Bruce has come back to these parts, I'll pick up a smell of him sooner or later."

Pierce Tenny said harshly, "You wouldn't be going soft-headed on this deal too, would you?"

A cool glint came into the sheriff's eyes. "When I need you to help run my business, Pierce, I'll let you know."

Tenny cursed and went away, over to the loading corrals, where cattle were bellowing mournful complaint, where cowboys were yipping and dust lifted in a thick and choking cloud.

Luke Ferris said, "Between all the weight Pierce Tenny and Lear Bradshaw like to throw around, it's a wonder the whole world ain't shoved clear out of plumb."

Cappy laughed. "I almost pity a man who figures nobody but him has a right to an opinion."



THE Rolling B herd was all loaded and ready before sundown, and Lear Bradshaw went over to the general store to order a load of supplies for the ranch. Cappy Daniels was there, gossiping idly.

Bradshaw growled. "If the eastbound freight is late tonight it won't be my fault. The cows are loaded."

Cappy grinned. "I knew you could do it, Lear, if you set yore mind and back to it."

Bradshaw read off a list of supplies. The storekeeper nodded and said, "Here's a letter for you, Lear."

Bradshaw stared at the missive as though puzzled, then ripped it open and read. He licked his lips, while a queer, strained expression came into his face.

The storekeeper noticed the expression and asked, "What's wrong, Lear? Bad news?"

Lear Bradshaw gave a start, "Huh? Oh, no. Nothing of any importance. Get those supplies together. I want to get rolling. Be back in half an hour."

As Bradshaw went out, the storekeeper looked at Cappy Daniels. "Maybe it wasn't bad news," he said softly. "But it sure was a jolt of some kind. Lear looked like he'd seen a ghost."

"Maybe he did," nodded Cappy. "Men who ride rough-shod over others to get wealth and power generally leave a few ghosts along the back-trail. You know, the paper of that letter Lear got looked kind of like what Luke Ferris uses in his office. Sort of tan-colored."

The storekeeper blinked. "Darned if it didn't, come to think of it. Well, we should worry. Let Lear skin his own ghosts."

The days went by and ran into a couple of weeks. A pair of Mexicans got into a cutting scrape over on the Honey River and Johnny Dell got piled by a spooky bronc and broke a leg. All of which gave Iron Mountain something else to talk about. The first hue and cry about Greg Bruce's successful escape from Deerfoot began to die out.

Four people still maintained peak interest in Greg Bruce. These were Sheriff Luke Ferris, Lear and Dene Bradshaw and Pierce Tenny. Luke Ferris dropped by nearly every day to see if Cappy Daniels had heard anything more over the telegraph wire. Lear Bradshaw came in twice and Dene Bradshaw came in three times. Pierce Tenny showed once.

Cappy Daniels was pretty tart with Tenny. "In your book I'm supposed to be soft-headed," Cappy told him. "Which means I'm not supposed to know a thing. Well, as far as you're concerned, I don't."

Pierce Tenny pulled his heavy lips together. "Me," he growled, "I'm wondering if you don't know a heap more about this Greg Bruce proposition than you're letting on. You got a cat and canary look about you. I'm telling you, Daniels, if you are holding out, you're skating on damn thin ice. I'll take it up with your company and get you fired so damn high you won't land for a month of Sundays."

Cappy still smiled, but the kindness in his eyes faded to a cold, hard light. "Bluster and be damned to you, Tenny. I don't scare worth a whoop. You go trying to put any pressure on me and you'll be surprised. By the way, what are you so interested in Greg Bruce for, anyhow? It couldn't be a guilty conscience riding you, could it? Or maybe you're seeing ghosts, like Lear Bradshaw seems to all the time. I never saw two guys who seemed to be walking on pins and needles like you two are."

Tenny's eyes went blank. "Now I know you're soft-headed," he snarled, and went away.

Lear Bradshaw was the one who interested Cappy most. The cattleman had lost weight. He was jumpy, grouchy. He was like a man expecting a heavy hand dropped on his shoulder at any time. Bradshaw was definitely badly worried.

And one day Iron Mountain got another morsel of gossip. Dene Bradshaw had moved, bag and baggage, into the Rawhide Hotel and was waiting on table for her board and lodging. Which could mean but one thing. For some reason Dene had left her father's roof and was definitely on her own—while Lear Bradshaw hit town and went on a roaring drunk.

The hangover left him in a savage mood, which he brought into Luke Ferris' office one hot afternoon. Cappy Daniels was there, trading idle chat with the sheriff.

Bradshaw stood just inside the door, shoulders hunched and head thrust forward. "I'm sick of it," he growled. "I want no more of it. If you got anything to say to me, Ferris, say it to my face like a man. Don't send me any of those damned anonymous notes."

Luke Ferris stared. "You're drunk, Lear," he said bluntly. "Go sleep it off. I don't know what you're talking about."

Bradshaw jerked a folded paper from a pocket and tossed it on the sheriff's desk. "You tell me you don't know anything about that?" he questioned harshly. "Look at that paper. Same kind and color of paper as that pad at your elbow. Same stuff exactly. And you try and say you didn't send that note to me!"

Luke Ferris slowly read the printed words on the paper Bradshaw had put before him. A slow tautness hit him.

"It is the same kind of paper, all right," he admitted. "But I didn't write these words and I didn't send it to you. Yet, it makes a good question. It asks why, right after Monk Harvey was killed, you got rid of that buckskin gelding you always rode and were so fond of. That's a fair question. Why did you, Lear?"

"My business," blurted Bradshaw. "It was my bronc and I could do as I pleased with it. You still say you didn't send me that damned note?"

"Hell, no!" crisped Ferris. "Any time I got a question to ask a man, I'll ask it to his face."

Despite his state of mind, Bradshaw could see that Luke Ferris was telling the truth. A hunted look came over the cattleman. "I find the gent responsible, it will be too bad for him," he muttered darkly as he went out.

Luke Ferris looked at Cappy Daniels and said slowly, "This is the queerest damn thing I ever ran across, Cappy. What do you make of it?"

Cappy scrubbed his chin with thumb and forefinger. "I remember that buckskin gelding, Luke," he murmured. "Come to think of it, Lear was mighty fond of the horse. Rode it all the time, didn't he? And then, all of a sudden, the buckskin sort of dropped out of circulation, right after the Monk Harvey case. All I can do, Luke, is wonder why."

"Me, too," grunted the sheriff.

Cappy grinned as he got up to leave. "I'm glad it is your job to figure out the reason. I ain't good at that sort of thing. Would give me a headache."

So, leaving Luke Ferris deep in puzzled thought, Cappy strolled back to his station house. But when Cappy lit a fire in his stove against the chill that evening, he fed the flames with a sheaf of tan-colored writing paper, the same kind that Luke Ferris used in his sheriff's office. Cappy was satisfied. Luke Ferris had a good mind when he started to use it, and Luke would be using it, now.



A COUPLE of days later Luke Ferris dropped in on Cappy. "Remember that buckskin bronc of Bradshaw's we were talking about the

other day?" he asked. "Well, I found out this much from Butch Growe, who's been shoing broncs in these parts for fifteen years. Butch remembered the horse. He said it had a split hind hoof that he always had to put a bar shoe on, and a bronc with a bar shoe would always leave a distinctive track. And right after Monk Harvey was killed, the bronc dropped out of sight. What do you think, Cappy?"

"Why, the way you put it, Luke, the disappearance of that horse is somehow tied in around the killing of Harvey," Cappy said slowly. "Right?"

"Right," growled Ferris. "Plenty!"

"Then," said Cappy, "it sort of follows that Lear Bradshaw knows more about the killing of Monk Harvey than he told when Greg Bruce was tried and sent to prison."

"You get the same answer I do, Cappy," admitted the sheriff. "Which leads to the thought that Greg Bruce could have been the one who sent Bradshaw that anonymous note. How he could have got the paper out of my office, though, is more than I can figure."

"And where would Greg be hiding out, if he is in these parts?" asked Cappy. "That's another angle, Luke."

"Yeah," Luke growled. "Too damned many angles for me."

And Luke went away, head bowed in troublesome thought.

That afternoon Dene Bradshaw called on Cappy. The girl looked wan and pale and determined. She said, "I've got to tell someone, Cappy—and we're old friends. Will—will you listen and try and understand?"

Cappy put an arm about her shoulder and said, "Why, of course, Dene. I'm an old man and you can confide in me to your heart's content. What is it, honey?"

"I'm sure that dad knows more about the killing of Monk Harvey than he has ever admitted," she told him. "That is why he and I quarreled. I faced him with that and he flew into a terrible rage. I—I want to see the matter opened again and, if possible, justice done."

"What makes you think this, Dene?"

"I happened to see a letter he had. It wasn't signed, it just asked a question, about a buckskin horse dad used to ride a lot. And it brought up the Harvey kill-

ing. I asked dad what about it, and he was furious."

Cappy drew a deep breath. "Have you stopped to think that if the case is opened again and new evidence brought to light, it might put your father in a very bad spot, Dene?"

The girl met his eyes fairly. "Yes," she said quietly. "That is why I've been so long, screwing up my courage to come and tell you this. But I'd rather have my father go to prison than to feel that he had let an innocent man go there in his place. It—it would be more honorable."

Cappy said softly, "Dene Bradshaw, you make me feel humble before you. Tell me, your father never did approve of your friendship with Greg Bruce, did he? Why?"

"Because Greg had only a start in range and cattle. Dad had always admired men with a lot of worldly goods. That is his measure of a man—how much he has, not what kind of a man he is. Dad wanted me to—to, well, be more friendly with Pierce Tenny. Because Tenny had a big ranch and lots of cattle, and his range joined ours. Dad was seeing a tremendous ranch with the two outfits combined. He wanted me to marry Pierce Tenny."

"That, of course," said Cappy, "is impossible."

Dene's white teeth came together in a little click. "Quite. The man is and always has been repulsive to me."

Cappy patted her shoulder. "Brave girl. What you have told me is worth a great deal. We'll see what can be done."

Cappy watched Dene go back to the hotel, then got busy on office work he'd neglected for the past week or so. He was hard at it when Pierce Tenny came clanking in. Tenny's black eyes were as unreadable as usual, but there was a pointed tenseness about him, as though he were hiding jumpy nerves.

"Anything new on this Greg Bruce proposition?" he rasped.

Cappy shrugged. "Why always ask me, Tenny? I'm just a station agent, not a sheriff. Go ask Luke Ferris. He'll know a lot more than me."

"Because," burst out Tenny in sudden fury, "you got a look about you I don't like. I got a notion to jam a gun barrel

down your throat and make you talk."

Cappy dropped a hand into the open drawer of his desk and it came out gripping a big old bulldog revolver, the gaping muzzle of which dropped right in line with Pierce Tenny's belt buckle. "Think again," Cappy said coldly. "Think again, Tenny. You can't come in here and threaten me. Get out and stay out. And don't ever come back unless it is straight business you want to talk—and nothing but straight business!"

For a moment red fire congested Tenny's eyes. Then he turned and left. And Cappy, watching, saw Lear Bradshaw and Sheriff Luke Ferris going into the sheriff's office. So, when he saw Tenny turn in at the swinging doors of the Jug Handle Saloon, Cappy slid the bulldog revolver into the pocket of his striped bib overalls, locked the station door, and headed for Luke Ferris's office. He had a hunch that things were moving fast.

♦ ♦ ♦

CAPPY found the sheriff's door locked, so he knocked. At Luke Ferris's question, Cappy called, "Got something to tell you, Luke. This is Cappy."

Luke let him in. Bradshaw was sitting slumped in the chair, the look of a weary, defeated man about him. "What's biting you, Cappy?" Ferris demanded.

"This. Pierce Tenny just came over to the station and threatened me. I had to flash my old gun on him and run him out. He seems to be worried to death about Greg Bruce. If you ask me, Luke, Pierce Tenny can tell you plenty about the killing of Monk Harvey—if you can make him talk."

An amazing thing happened. Lear Bradshaw laughed harshly and said, "That's right, Luke. Tenny can tell you plenty. Because Tenny killed Monk Harvey."

Luke Ferris swung around. "That's a big mouthful you're making, Bradshaw," he rasped. "What makes you say that?"

"Because I can't stand this thing any longer," Bradshaw said brokenly. "My conscience has been horse-whipping me to a cinder, for all these years. I can't stand having my girl Dene living away from me,

and hating me. In my blind, stupid ambition to get more range, more cattle, I let an innocent man go to the pen and then, when I realized what a dog I was, I didn't have nerve enough to admit my mistake and tell the truth. But I'm telling the truth now. Pierce Tenny killed Monk Harvey. I know, because I saw him do it. If he was here now, I'd face him with that accusation."

"He ain't far away," Cappy reminded them. "Just over in the Jug Handle."

"As good a time and place as any," Luke Ferris said harshly. "Come on, Bradshaw. Maybe you got nerve enough to be a man; maybe you haven't."

As they crossed the street, Cappy noticed that Lear Bradshaw's shoulders were squared, his head back.

Pierce Tenny was half way down the bar, a glass and bottle before him. He had just put away one drink and was pouring another. At sight of Cappy, Luke Ferris and Lear Bradshaw, Tenny swung around.

Bradshaw wasted no time. He looked Tenny in the eye and said, "You killed Monk Harvey. I saw you do it. I've just come out of a bad dream. I'm laying all the cards on the table."

The room went dead quiet. The bartender's startled eyes stuck out like marbles. He began sidling away.

Pierce Tenny put both hands on top of the bar, spread palms down. He barked a harsh laugh. "Won't do, Bradshaw. You can't saddle me with your own crime. I didn't kill Monk Harvey. But you did!"

Lear Bradshaw shook his head slowly. "No use trying to lie, Pierce. You can't outlive a lie. I know. I tried, and it can't be done. A jury will believe me—but they won't you. Because I'll be telling the truth finally, and you'll be lying."

Cappy saw the ripple of effort flow down Pierce Tenny's arms, saw his fingers grip the bar top as he used the leverage to throw himself whirling and spinning away. Then those same hands were streaking for his guns.

The walls seemed to bulge under the roar of Tenny's first shot. Lear Bradshaw, a bright fan of crimson spreading down one side of his face, went down in his tracks. At Tenny's second shot there was a muffled snap and Luke Ferris's left

leg went out from under him, letting him down in a heap and throwing his first shot high and wild. Then Tenny was leaping for the door, pulling down on Cappy Daniels as he went.

Cappy forgot all about the old gun in his overalls pocket. He was no hand with a gun. All he could think of doing was to grab a chair and send it skittering across the floor in front of the fleeing Tenny. The chair tangled Tenny's feet. He was already falling as he cut loose at Cappy, and because of that he missed Cappy by something less than a foot.

Tenny rolled over and came to his feet again, cursing like a madman. As he did, Luke Ferris, up on one elbow, threw his second shot, a deliberate and calculated shot. It ripped through Pierce Tenny, heart high, and Tenny fell down.



CAPPY DANIELS was checking over some freight manifests when Luke Ferris sent for him. Luke was propped up in bed, swearing at the pain in his bullet-blasted leg.

"Doc was just in," he growled. "Lear Bradshaw is going to make it. Just missed concussion from that scalp crease. Dene is with him and they've made up. Now, if we could just get word to Greg Bruce that his name is cleared, I could rest easy. But by this time, Greg is probably across the Border into Mexico."

Cappy grinned. "Nothing of the sort, Luke. Greg is in town. Has been ever since he came in on a freight and asked me to help him work out some plan to establish his innocence. He's been laying up in my spare storeroom out at the station. He's there now."

For a moment Luke Ferris was speechless. Finally he swore, then grinned grudgingly. "You cussed, white-haired old fox. Right now I know who sent that anonymous letter to Lear Bradshaw."

"Sure," admitted Cappy. "I stole the paper out of your office so that Lear would think you did it. That way, it would worry him a heap more and make him break down and talk. Worked, didn't it?"

"You're too good," growled Luke. "Makes me look like a pin head. You bring Greg here. I want to know why he

ever let himself take the rap for somebody else."

"Couldn't help himself," said Cappy. "The evidence which cinched Greg was the fact that he was found standing over Monk Harvey's body with a drawn gun. That, and the fact that Greg had threatened to kill Harvey one time because Harvey had made some remarks about Dene Bradshaw."

"I know all that," Luke Ferris said. "But what about Bradshaw? Where did he come in—him and that buckskin bronc?"

"Here is how Greg told it to me," explained Cappy. "He heard the shot that killed Harvey, out along the Bitterwater Trail. He went to investigate, his gun drawn, just in case. There was Harvey, crumpled up dead. And there were some hoofprints, made by a bar shoe. Greg knew Bradshaw's buckskin had a bar shoe. Thinking about Dene, Greg brushed those marks out."

"But why didn't the darn fool talk and tell all this at the trial?" demanded Luke Ferris.

Cappy shrugged. "Young man in love. There was Dene Bradshaw, remember. Greg kept thinking about her. And he kept waiting for Lear Bradshaw to speak up on his own. He knew Lear didn't like him, having other plans for Dene. But he never thought Lear would let him go to Deerfoot for a crime he did not commit. Then, the first thing Greg knew, the verdict was in and he was sentenced."

"Even then he could have talked and told what he knew about them hoof tracks," argued the sheriff.

"Who'd have believed him—then?"

said Cappy. "In brushing out the tracks of that bar shoe, he'd destroyed all evidence that might have made Bradshaw talk. It wasn't until he was in Deerfoot and the months began to roll by, that Greg realized Bradshaw never was going to tell what he knew. Then the kid laid his plans for escape."

"Come right down to it, we still don't know whether Tenny or Bradshaw really killed Monk Harvey," growled Luke Ferris. "We never can prove that, now."

"Tenny was the one," said Cappy. "Greg and me figured it out. Bradshaw saw him do it, all right. Bradshaw must have heard the shot, same as Greg Bruce did, and rode up to investigate. Or, as he claims, he saw Tenny do it. Tenny cleared out and when Bradshaw heard Greg coming, he high-tailed. But while Tenny's horse would leave no distinctive signs in the trail, that buckskin of Bradshaw's did. And Bradshaw wanted to cover up for Tenny, because he still had ambitions to tie his spread and Tenny's together. You'll find, when Bradshaw can talk more, he'll clear it all up."

"I pass," said Luke Ferris. "You've managed everything so far, you might as well handle the rest. I'll straighten things out for Greg at Deerfoot, of course. No guards were hurt in that prison break, so they'll have nothing extra against the boy. I'd suggest you go send him over to see Dene right away."

"I'm going to," said Cappy. "And I figured on bringing you a bottle of beer, if the Doc will stand for it."

"Bring two bottles," said Luke eagerly. "We'll drink to the health of Greg and Dene."

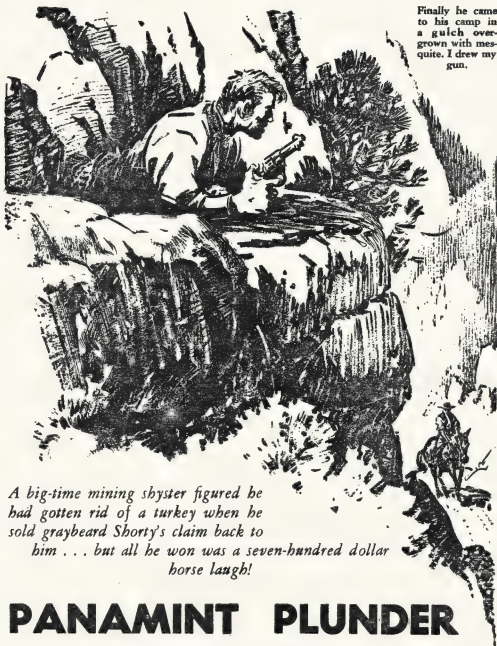


SAVE AND SERVE!

It's up to you to pay for the planes and tanks and guns to win this war. Lend Uncle Sam one dollar out of every ten that you earn on the home front—for America's victory!

BUY WAR BONDS!

Finally he came to his camp in a gulch overgrown with mesquite. I drew my gun.



A big-time mining shyster figured he had gotten rid of a turkey when he sold graybeard Shorty's claim back to him . . . but all he won was a seven-hundred dollar horse laugh!

PANAMINT PLUNDER

By DAVID GEORGE

I SAW the thief as he came out of the ore shed. It was a dark night, but a light shone from the bunk house window, and the thief passed by it, so I could see the sack of ore he hefted on his shoulders. I reached for my .45.

"Hold on!" I warned myself then.

There was a lot of high-grading going on around Rhyolite. And I realized that catching this one thief wouldn't do near as much to stop the ore-looting as trailing him to the crooked assayer who was buying the stolen stuff. If we could run those ore-buyers out of Nevada, we stood

a show to stop the high-grading. So I crouched in the shadows and watched.

The thief came back for another sack. I followed him, then, into the gulch back of the mine. I saw him load the ore onto a burro. Then up the gulch he went, driving his burro as fast and as quietly as he could.

Leaving the gulch, he drove the jack across the bare desert—not toward Rhyolite, but headed off between Amargosa and Jumpertown, and angled south, toward the sandhills near Death Valley Junction. He wasn't hard to follow. A fat orange moon was edging up in the east, and now and again, as the ore thief topped a little rise, I could see him. A little, stooped-over hombre, he was. Drunk, too, I decided, when he started singing.

But presently, as I listened to him sing, I realized he was *not* drunk. There was something too strong and steady, and, well, kind of triumphant, in the way he bawled out the words of that old song about Panamint.

*"Her picks are rust,
Her bones are dust;
It's forty years
Since she went bust!"*

He turned east, into some low hills.

Finally he came to his camp in a gulch overgrown with mesquite. I drew my gun. Maybe the crooked gold-buyer was waiting here. But the little thief was alone. Humming under his breath, he built up a cookin' fire and set on water for coffee. And then I got my first shock when the firelight played full on him and I recognized him.

This ore thief was old Shorty Norris himself!

It staggered me. Why, Shorty was the original old-timer hereabouts! Shorty was one of the first prospectors into the Death Valley region, and one of the best.

Shorty had a prospect hole on the other side of the camp clearing. I saw him empty my sacks of ore into his hoist bucket, lower the ore into the hole, then go down himself. After a while he came up. *Without my ore.*

Now, my rock was rich. Real jewelry rock—awful' pretty green and blue rock all shot through with hunks of gold. There was just one thing Shorty could

be doing with my ore. Salting his claim! I realized, getting sore.

My hand tightened hard on my gun. But I hesitated. I couldn't avalanche on to Shorty's neck. Why, old Shorty Norris had been in this country since the devil scorched and convulsed it and God poured in gold to compensate! Why, it was Shorty's strike that had made Panamint, in 1875, and stamped thousands of men into Death Valley to turn an empty gulch into a howling Gomorrah overnight!

Not that Shorty had got rich from his bonanza. Oh, no! Shorty had celebrated his find. Shorty woke up in the morning with a hangover and no mine. Some sharper had got him drunk. Said sharper bought his mine off him for \$800. Said sharper helped him spend every last buck of that \$800 for whiskey. So Shorty had gone back to prospecting on grubstakes. And for twenty-five long years he'd been a little flying Dutchman of the desert, a little alkali ghost withering and weazening with sun and loneliness who poked and pried into every fold and wrinkle of the Panamints and desert, and found nothing worth busting a gut about. And then, four years ago, Shorty had struck it rich again. Gold at Tonopah!

And Shorty had twenty-five years of sweat and alkali and loneliness to celebrate out of his system. Shorty got drunk, and Shorty got gyped. When his hangover eased off, he had no mine. The sharper who'd boozed him blind with whiskey had the mine.

So, thinking of all that, I relaxed.

"Shorty's out to gyp the gypers," I realized. "He's over seventy years old, and he wants to make a little stake to last 'im till he dies. I hope he sells this salted claim for ten thousand. By Godfrey, I'm keepin' my mouth shut!"

And I left, without letting Shorty know I'd seen him at all.



BUT old Shorty hadn't salted his mine well enough! It was a week or so before I went into Rhyolite for a little excitement. Rhyolite was all excitement, just then. The two streets were mostly saloons and gambling houses,

and the tide of empire was mostly an ebb and flow of money and whiskey. Yes, sir, she was a gay camp, any night. That night, though, I felt an extra edge of excitement. Men stood out in front of the Combination, the Sixty-Six, and the Louvre, palaverin' hot and heavy. I walked into Kelly's Bar, and the boys told me the story.

Shorty Norris had done it again.

Old Shorty had come into camp with news of a strike. So what happened? So a sharper named Teague had got Shorty drunk and bought his new bonanza off him for pennies. Just like before.

Only, *this* time, Shorty had out-foxed the foxer! 'Cause when Orville Teague got around to looking at the claim, he discovered it was a worthless hole in the ground that had been salted with jewelry rock from some other mine!

Hearing that, I laughed.

But the boys weren't laughing. And Tonto Ryan explained to me, "Teague's ravin' mad. He swears he'll send old Shorty to prison. He says Shorty's got to give 'im back his money he paid for that worthless hole, or he'll send Shorty to jail for fraud. And Shorty *can't* give the money back. Shorty's likkered it up."

"But Shorty'll die in prison," I said.

"Damn 'im," Tonto swore, "why didn't Shorty ask *me* to salt that hole for 'im. I'd've done a good job."

I said, "We can't let him go to jail."

"We ain't. We're lendin' Shorty money to pay back to Teague."

"Teague?" I said. "Ain't he the gyp-
per who bought Shorty's Tonopah strike for pennies and made millions?"

"Yeah. Shorty owes 'im double. Got any money to lend Shorty?"

I had, and I did . . . and in Kelly's Bar, that night, old Shorty returned Orville Teague's seven hundred bucks to him.

And Shorty asked, "Now my mine belongs to me again?"

"Yeah," the bald, gimlet-eyed promoter snapped.

Then, a funny thing happened.

Shorty drew himself up till he looked a foot taller than his five-feet three, his white mustache bristling and his faded eyes shining with a light like sun glancing off a rifle barrel. And Shorty let out a Co-

manche whoop that would've done credit to a young buck full of panther sweat.

"The drinks are on me, boys! I'm rich, I'm rich again!"

We wondered if he'd gone loco.

Teague rasped, "What's that you say?"

But Shorty didn't explain to him, Shorty explained to *us*, screeching it out: "When I came in here last week and said I had a new strike, this Teague jasper got me drunk. When I got over it, I didn't have no mine. Teague had it. I been gyped that way before. I wanted my mine back. So I did some thinking. Here's what I did. I rushed back to my claim, before Teague got there, and I salted it with rock from Joe Bush's Amargosa mine. I salted the hole so that Teague would *see* it was salted. I scattered that blue-green Amargosa rock around in a way that Teague couldn't *help* but see my claim was salted! So what happened? When Teague looked in to the hole, he didn't find any gold except what any dum' fool could see was scattered on top of ground that didn't have any gold in it. You know the rest. Teague's made me give 'im back his money, and he's give me back my mine!"

"Damn right," Teague grunted. "Ain't no gold in that ground!"

"I never said there was," Shorty retorted. "You jumped to that conclusion yourself when I said I'd made a new strike. There's no gold in that ground, but there's a helluva lot of the same ore that made Panamint—a silver-chloride and copper-silver glance that'll assay up to \$4,000 a ton!"

We went hog-wild. We whooped and hollered—and Orville Teague slunk out of there like he was poisoned.

I said, "Shorty, I've heard of guys saltin' a mine to sell it dear. But damned if I ever heard of a man saltin' a mine to buy it cheap! Have a drink, oldtimer?"

"Sure!" old Shorty yawned. Then he hesitated. He looked at the whiskey in my glass, and he looked at the barkeep; and his parched lips quivered and his scrawny Adam's apple bobbed. But he wasn't taking chances. Not any more. Gold is tough to get; and tougher to keep. Real' loud and defiant, old Shorty croaked, "Make mine sassparilly!"

THE WILD BLOOD

By
**PHILIP
KETCHUM**



A sharp silence fell over the room. Everyone there jerked around and looked in the direction Rand was staring.

The hard oath of the law rode heavily on the shoulders of Matt Starrett, deputy U.S. Marshal—and he damned well vowed he'd never ride with one outlaw brother to save another from a murderer's hangnoose!

A MINER who had struck it rich in the Kiowa hills left Tiffany for the east late one summer afternoon, and an hour before sunset Big Ed

Starrett headed off in the same direction. Ed Starrett had once been a Texas Ranger. A year before, after his father's death, he had taken over his old man's

job as Tiffany's sheriff. No one thought to connect his departure with that of the miner until the next day, when a Bar 70 rider happened across the body of the miner. The man had been shot three times in the chest.

It took another day for the men of Wind River valley to accept the evidence so clearly written at the scene of the murder. Even then it was hard for them to realize that Big Ed had followed the miner, had caught up with him, killed him, robbed his body, and then headed for the pass over the Sawtooth mountains. Perhaps if it hadn't been for the record of Johnny Starrett, Big Ed's brother, men still wouldn't have believed the evidence. Though two of Fighting Jim Starrett's sons had made names for themselves as peace officers, Johnny, the third and youngest son, had gone wrong.

"Bad blood," Dan Loring said heavily. "I would have sworn Ed was as straight as they come, but I reckon, underneath, he was just like his kid brother."

There was a general agreement in that. To those men of the valley who had liked Big Ed, it seemed to lighten the blame on him. A few, however, didn't feel that way at all, and among them was Dan Loring's daughter, Myra. That night, Myra wrote a letter. She had one of her father's men, a fellow she could trust, ride as far east as Sawtelle before mailing it. . . .

* * *

Matt Starrett, who was a United States Deputy Marshal, read of the charge against Big Ed in a circular which caught up with him in La Junta. He finished the job he was on and then dropped a note to his chief. He said that he was called to Tiffany on a matter of personal importance and that he would report back as soon as possible. He made no other explanations. That same day he started south.

Once before, Matt Starrett had ridden toward Tiffany with a heavy heart. That time, Ed had been with him, and they had been going to Tiffany to attend their father's funeral. Johnny had shown up, too, and had helped them in clearing away the cloud of suspicion under which Fighting Jim Starrett had died.

Matt thought of this as he rode south, and the memory of it bothered him. He was a man close to forty, deeply set in his ways. He knew what he believed in. He had his standards for measuring other men, and by those standards Johnny was an enemy, a man to be arrested on sight, to be shot down if he resisted. Matt hoped that word of the charges against Big Ed wouldn't reach Johnny. Whatever had to be done he was sure he could do himself. It didn't once occur to him that Big Ed might be guilty.

♦ ♦ ♦

JOHNNY had told Myra Loring how she could reach him if she ever needed him, but he had never thought that she would write. His hands weren't very steady as he tore open the envelope the old Mexican had brought him.

"It is from her, señor?" asked the old man.

Johnny nodded, scanning the few hurriedly written lines.

"She is coming here, perhaps?"

"No, Tio. But for a time I must go north. And until I return you must tell all who ask for John Wayne that he is in El Paso on business."

The old Mexican frowned. He, alone, of all the men on this ranch below the border, knew that John Wayne was in reality Johnny Starrett. And he knew that a trip to the States meant danger. For a year, now, Johnny had seemed content. The old man was sorry he had brought back the letter from the village.

That same night, Johnny Starrett headed north. He wore clothing that was strange to the personality of John Wayne. Two guns were tied low on his hips. For the first time in months he thrilled to the old feeling of excitement that had once governed his life.

A two-day trip carried Johnny across the Border and three more days of hard riding brought him to the western approach to Gunsight Pass. Johnny could have saved time by a more direct route, but he was still wanted by many a sheriff up here and he had kept off the main roads and skirted all towns.

Late in the afternoon of the next day,

Johnny Starrett topped the pass and dropped down the western slope of the Sawtooth mountains. He made his camp that night on a mesa where he had once hunted wild horses. He spent the next day there, thinking a good deal of Myra Loring and of his brother Ed, and of Matt. He had a notion that Matt would be in Tiffany, and that he would be no more glad to see him than on the occasion of their last meeting.

With the coming of dusk, Johnny mounted his horse again and dropped down into the Wind River valley. The very air seemed to smell of home. He could close his eyes and imagine he had never been away, that he was once more on his way to spend the evening at the Bar 70.

Cutting across the corner of the old Starrett range, he angled for Loring's Bar 70. From a coulee a quarter of a mile distant from the ranchhouse he gave the long, wavering cry of a coyote. Fifteen minutes later, as he was about to repeat it, he heard the sound of hurrying footsteps. And then, from the high bank of the coulee, he heard Myra's voice guardedly calling his name.

"Down here, Myra," he answered.

The girl came scrambling down to where he stood waiting. She reached a hand toward him. "Johnny, Johnny. Is it really you?"

Johnny didn't take her hand. He couldn't trust himself that far. He had loved Myra Loring for as long as he could remember. During the years that he had followed the owlhoot trail he had seen her face in the smoke of every campfire. His ranch across the Border was a desperate gamble to establish an identity which he might some day ask her to share, though in his more honest moments he knew such a thought to be hopeless.

"I got your letter Myra," he told her. "Is there more than you told me?"

"I'm afraid there is, Johnny."

"Has Ed been found?"

"No."

"Then what else is there?"

The girl bit her lips. She said, "Johnny, I don't believe it, but here it is. There's been a gold strike in the Kiowa hills. Two or three hundred men have moved in there. Some have been lucky, but—they

haven't come out with their gold. Three who left were found dead later. They had been robbed. They—"

"Ed?" Johnny asked quietly.

"That's what people say. One of the men scrawled your brother's name in the dirt before he died. Near another was found a cuff-link with your brother's initials on it. Poses have searched the Kiowa hills from end to end without finding him, but—"

Myra's voice trailed off. She shook her head.

"Is Matt here?" Johnny asked.

"Yes."

"Leading the posesses?"

"No, Johnny, but Matt's aged a dozen years in the few days he's been here. He wouldn't believe, at first, that Ed could have gone bad, but now I think he does believe it and it's hurt him. There's something else that's hurt him, too. The men of the valley don't trust him. That is—"

"He's just another Starrett," Johnny breathed, and he couldn't keep his bitterness out of his voice.

Myra reached forward and caught his arm. She said, "Yes, Johnny, but you and I know that there's no bad strain in the Starrett blood."

Johnny Starrett pulled away. He knew what Myra was really saying. She was telling him that she still believed in him, no matter what the records might show or what men might say. And he would have liked to tell her that it was her faith in him that had held him steady on many an occasion when it would have been much easier to have gone the other way.

"Where is Matt staying?" he asked.

"At the hotel in Tiffany. But Johnny, he doesn't feel any differently about you. If you go to see him—"

Johnny Starrett grinned. "Matt will never change, nor would Ed. He's no murderer, Myra. A cuff link near a dead body, a name scrawled in the sand—things like that are easy to arrange. I'm glad you wrote me."

"You're going to see Matt?"

Johnny turned and mounted his horse. He nodded his head, waved to the girl and rode on down the coulee. A quarter of a mile away he climbed out and set off across country toward Tiffany. There was a tight, worried look on his face.

THE past year hadn't changed the town of Tiffany, on the north bank of the Wind River. Fifteen or twenty houses were clustered behind those fronting on the main street and in most of them were lights.

Johnny Starrett came up on the town from the west, passed the first few houses and left his horse tied outside the corral fence behind Wyatt's Livery stable. He circled behind the O.K. Saloon and the Silver Grill Restaurant and came to the back of the hotel.

Between the hotel and the store beyond there was a narrow passageway. In it, Johnny stopped and waited, keeping his eyes turned toward the street.

He wondered what would happen if he just walked out there and showed himself to the town. It didn't take much effort to figure an answer. His face was well known in Tiffany. Three years before, when the Tiffany bank had been raided, Johnny had been five hundred miles away, yet someone had sworn that he rode with the outlaws. Tiffany wouldn't forget a thing like that.

After a while Johnny edged toward the street. As he drew even with the hotel porch he could make out a solitary figure sitting there, a wide-shouldered man hunched back in his chair. Matt Starrett.

Several men were coming up the street, men who would soon pass the hotel. Johnny climbed to the porch.

Matt jerked a look at him and stiffened. He started to get up.

"Stay right where you are, Matt," Johnny ordered. "I want to talk to you."

Matt said nothing. He remained in his chair but the stiffness didn't leave his body. Johnny took a chair beside him, tilted his hat over his eyes and reached for his tobacco and papers. He started rolling a cigarette. The men approaching the hotel reached and passed it, casting curious looks at the two men on the porch.

"What do you want?" Matt demanded gruffly. "Say it an' then get out of here."

Johnny lit his cigarette, bending over so that the flare of the match wouldn't show his face. "I'm afraid it's not so simple as that, Matt," he answered. "I want to talk about Ed."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"What do you know about him?"

"I know he's straight, Matt. I know he's not what men are saying."

There was a heavy scowl on Matt's face. He shook his large head doubtfully.

"Cuff links could be dropped by anyone," Johnny went on. "A name could be written in the sand."

"But what about this? Ed followed that miner who left here, the first one who was killed. His trail led straight to the place where the man's body was found. There were no others involved in what happened. The man had been robbed and Ed disappeared."

"Let's find Ed and ask him what happened."

"How?"

"He's in the Kiowa hills, some place, or at least there is someone there who knows about him."

"Posses have searched the Kiowas from one end to the other."

"No one in the valley knows the Kiowas as I do."

"You're suggesting that I ride with you?"

"Why not?"

Matt shook his head. "If we found him, Johnny, you might forget what side I was on."

There was a harshness in those words which was like a slap in the face. Johnny got to his feet. His lips curled with scorn. "You're a hell of a brother, Matt," he said slowly. "I might have expected that for myself, but not for Ed. Why don't you crawl in a hole somewhere an' hide?"

The two men who had passed down the street had joined several others in front of one of Tiffany's saloons. They were all staring toward the hotel and now started forward. Johnny had been watching them. He didn't think the two men had recognized him. Still, they might remember how he had shown up just after his father's death, and perhaps they had guessed who he was.

"Want to ride with me, Matt?" he asked again.

Matt Starrett shook his head. "No, an' you better make tracks outa here. Fast."

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. He crossed the porch, stepped off the other end and looked around. One of the men down the street yelled at him to wait. Light from a store window glistened on the gun the man had drawn. Johnny waved and ducked between the hotel and the next building. From the street back of him he heard the crash of a gun, then the pounding of men's feet and the excited clamor of voices.

Johnny made a wide circle from the back of the hotel to the place where he had left his horse. Someone sighted him as he mounted it and shouted a warning to the other men. Close to a dozen had now filtered back from the main street. Shots stabbed through the air at Johnny Starrett, and Johnny raked up one of his guns and sent back his answer. The old thrill of excitement now gripped him. A mocking laugh sounded from his throat as he rode away.

Back on the hotel porch, Matt Starrett refused to answer any questions. He watched a hurried posse find mounts and set out after Johnny, and after a time he got his own horse. The posse was heading east, in which direction Johnny Starrett seemed to have gone. Matt rode north toward the Kiowas.



JOHNNY STARRETT led the posse east in a long, swinging circle, then south across the river, and then west. Before the full light of morning he came to the trail over Gunsight Pass and rode up it a ways, turning off down a rocky creek bed where the tracks of his horse would be hard to follow. He spent the day in those foothills and by night dropped down into the valley again and angled across country toward the Kiowas.

A new road reaching into the Kiowas pointed the way toward the gold strike and Johnny took it, reaching the mushroom town in the hills along about midnight, and through a clutter of shacks and tent houses, Johnny made his way to the main and only street. Here, in larger tents and a few board buildings, were half a dozen saloons and gambling halls and restaurants. In spite of the

late hour, crowds of noisy men were working off the day's excitement through liquor and games of chance.

Johnny tied his horse to a rickety hitching rail near one of the saloons and took a place at a wagon not far away. There he leaned, eyeing the men he could see and listening to snatches of talk. Some of the crowd from Wind River valley were probably here and Johnny knew that he might be recognized at any moment, yet he wanted to look this place over. During the years he had followed the owlhoot trail he had come to know a good many others who were on the dodge. He had a feeling that some well organized outlaw band had trapped and killed the men who had tried to leave here with their gold, and such a band, he had decided, would have men placed here to spot those who were planning to ride out.

No one seemed to pay any attention to him. Johnny fashioned a cigarette but didn't light it. He caught a glimpse of Matt turning into one of the tent saloons and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. A man across from that place limped down the street and turned into another saloon. Johnny scowled. This was the same limping man he had seen for only a moment in Tiffany, and once more something tugged at an old memory.

Johnny moved up the street. He turned through the same tent flap which the limping man had raised and, in the crowded room beyond, spotted the fellow at a pine-board bar. He could see half the man's face, the thin line of a scar on his jaw and the flat angle of his nose. The man turned toward him, and in that moment Johnny knew who he was.

"Rand! Steve Rand!"

The name jumped unbidden from Johnny's lips. It was the name of an outlaw whose bloody record had streaked from one end of Texas to another, who had been driven west by the Rangers.

Rand saw and recognized him in the same instant and the man's body stiffened. Then Rand lifted his arm and pointed. "There he is," he cried. "There he is. Starrett!"

A sharp silence fell over the room. Everyone there jerked around and looked in the direction Rand was staring. The

men in that saloon knew the name Starrett. It was the name of a peace officer who had killed and robbed three or perhaps more of their companions. They had a hate for the name that was born of fear. A dozen hands clawed for guns.

Johnny Starrett whirled around and ducked for the door. He heard the crashing of guns and felt a stab of pain in his side. A man just coming into the saloon caught a slug in the stomach. He folded over and fell.

Johnny was past him, racing for his horse. Behind him, men poured out on the street. They were shouting the name of Starrett. More shots whistled past him. Those up ahead ducked out of the way. Johnny reached his horse, jerked the reins free and mounted at a gallop as his horse tore down the street. Pain from the wound in his side made him slightly dizzy.

Just beyond the edge of town his horse faltered and Johnny knew the horse had been hit. He slid from the saddle and let the horse run on alone. A moment later a dozen mounted men passed the place where he was crouching—and, still later, came one man alone.

Johnny stood up. He said, "Matt, over here."

Matt Starrett reined up. "You killed a man back there, Johnny."

"Not me, Matt. It was those who shot at me."

"A man is dead because you stopped here."

Matt Starrett got down from the saddle. "You can have my horse, Johnny," he said slowly. "Take him and ride away. Don't turn back. I'll hate myself for doing this, but I can't help it."

Johnny moved forward. He clawed his way into the saddle and then looked at his brother. "I saw Steve Rand back there, Matt," he said. "Have you ever heard of him? What in the hell would

Rand be doing in a place like this?"

"Get going," Matt told him flatly.

◆ ◆ ◆

AT A point about a mile away, Johnny reined up and fixed a bandage over the wound in his side. How bad the wound was he didn't know. The bullet which had hit him hadn't passed through his body. He could feel it under the skin of his back. He had a notion that he needed a doc.

Johnny knew the Kiowa hills as he knew the palm of his own hand. He had been through them from one end to the other as a boy. He had hunted here as a young man. He had hidden here many a time in the early days when he was on the dodge, and posses searching for him had never found him. Ever since his talk with Myra he had wondered if the men he was after had located the cavern which had served as his shelter on many occasions.

Twisting his way through the hills, Johnny headed for the deep ravine where the opening to the cavern was located. Here the land was wild and rugged and was covered with a dense, thorny underbrush. Johnny finally made it to the ravine. A ways back he tied his horse, and at the edge he awaited the dawn, rolled in his blanket, secure between two huge rocks. He slept a little, but not very well, and once he was roused by the sound of men's voices reaching up from the ravine. He guessed, then, that he was on the right trail.

When the light of the coming day began to thin out the shadows in the eastern sky, Johnny got to his feet. He untied the halter rope on Matt's horse and, leaving it free, made his way to the edge of the ravine and climbed downward. His whole left side was stiff and he was hot and a little giddy with the

Girls like Myra Loring, whose faith and love turned Johnny Starrett's course at the crossroads of decency and lawlessness, motivated much of the most stirring, exciting drama that has come out of the West. For the warm, dashing, intimate stories of their colorful, enthralling lives, read our companion magazine, **RANGELAND ROMANCES**. On sale at your newsstand.

flush of fever, but he knew quite clearly what he had to do. He was afraid it was a job that a man alone couldn't handle, and for that reason he had made every possible effort to bring Matt along. Matt, however, had failed him.

At the narrow end of the ravine and near the shrubbery which hid the entrance to the deep cavern under the hills, Johnny waited. An hour slipped by. It grew quite light. Suddenly, from around the shrubbery hiding the entrance, there appeared the figure of a man.

Johnny Starrett was sitting at a point about a dozen yards from the man. He drew his guns and spoke quietly.

"Don't move for a minute, mister."

The man swung to face Johnny Starrett. His hands had dropped to his guns, but he didn't draw them. Very slowly, he lifted his arms into the air.

"All I want you to do," Johnny went on, "is carry Steve Rand a message. Rand's the boss here, isn't he?"

The man gulped. He nodded his head.

"All right, mister," Johnny went on. "Step back inside the cave an' tell Steve Rand I want to see him. Tell him Johnny Starrett's outside."

The man took a step backward, then whirled and ducked out of sight. Johnny got up and moved a little to the left and to a point where he would be sheltered from the sight of anyone leaving the cavern. He sat down again and laid a gun on either side of him.

Several minutes dragged slowly by. Johnny Starrett wondered grimly how Rand had received the word that he was here. He wondered how many men were with Rand and what Rand would do. There was no way out of the cavern except by this entrance. Sooner or later, Rand would have to talk to him.

There was a movement of the shrubbery covering the entrance to the cavern, and a moment later Johnny heard Rand's voice.

"All right, Starrett," Rand was calling. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Talk ahead."

"Come out where I can see you."

Rand's laugh was ugly. "An' get shot down. Not a chance, Starrett."

"What's the matter, Rand?" Johnny

mocked. "Are you afraid of me. Bring your whole crowd out if you feel like it, or if you'd rather stay back there in your hole until you starve to death, duck back in. I'm in no hurry."

There was a whispered conference at the mouth of the cavern. Rand's safest course, without question, was to wait, but Steve Rand and the men with him were of the type who liked a quick decision. Waiting came hard for them.

The whispering stopped and a moment later Steve Rand limped into view. With him were two other men, tall, grimly silent fellows who kept their hands close to their guns. Rand had more men than this, Johnny knew.

Johnny holstered his guns and stepped out into sight. He tried to hide the fact that he was wounded. He fought grimly to hold himself steady.

"Thought I might find you here, Rand," he said.

Steve Rand was watching him narrowly.

"Maybe before we start talkin', you ought to tell those men of yours who are coverin' me through the bushes not to fire their guns," Johnny went on. "They could get me, of course, but not before I finished with you, Rand."

Steve Rand shrugged his shoulders. "What the hell do you want?"

"I want to know where I can find my brother."

"Why ask me?"

"Because you know, Rand. You couldn't hide out this close to all that gold that's bein' dug outa the hills an' not want it. It's your crowd that killed the miners who tried to ride out. Maybe it was damned clever to try an' pin the blame on Big Ed Starrett. Maybe not. Anyway, where is he?"

"He's dead," Rand answered bluntly.

Johnny frowned. "Maybe, but I want proof. It would have been clever of you, Rand, to have kept him alive. Then, when the chase got a little hot, you could have killed him an' left his body near the scene of another of your crimes."

Rand's hand had been fingering the edge of his coat. It slipped lower and a definite tension came over the outlaw's body. He moistened his lips.

"You talk too much, Starrett. But you

were right when you guessed that you were covered from the mouth of the cavern. Get your hands up."

"Get my hands up, Rand? Sure, I'll get 'em up."

As he spoke he lifted them, lifted them past his holsters, raking out his guns. He felt the jar as they kicked back against his palms and he saw Rand sweeping back his coat and grabbing desperately at his holster. A little puff of dust lifted from Rand's vest as one of Johnny's bullets struck him and staggered him.

Johnny was down. Just how it had happened he didn't know. His feet had seemed to be jerked out from under him. He rolled away from Rand, lifted up on his elbows and fired at the other two men, then started rolling away again.

The high, singing whine of a rifle bullet screamed past him and one of the other two men went down. The rifle sounded again. Someone was shooting down from the opposite bank of the ravine. Johnny wondered vaguely who it was. He reached the shelter of some bushes and emptied his guns in the general direction of the cavern. He thought he heard someone shouting his name. It sounded like Matt's voice, but that couldn't be.

Then all at once Matt was at his side. With a gun in each hand he was blasting away at the mouth of the cavern. Johnny had never seen his brother look so grim or angry. After a minute Matt said, "I'm going in there, Johnny."

He did, with both guns still blazing. And suddenly all the gunfire was over and, while Johnny still watched, Matt came back into view. With him was a gaunt, thin, bearded man who looked an awful lot like Big Ed Starrett. Johnny tried to get up, and made it. But the shadows he had been fighting off were all at once too much for him. He fell into them.

♦ ♦ ♦

TWO of the Starrett brothers sat that night near a campfire deep in the heart of the Kiowa hills. Near them, on a pallet of blankets, lay the youngest of Fighting Jim Starrett's boys. His wounds had been cared for

by Matt Starrett, who, when it came to things like that, was good.

"The kid'll make it, all right," Matt nodded, "but I don't know about this scheme of yours to bring Myra out here to look after him. She's a pretty fine girl, Ed."

"An' what the hell's the matter with Johnny?" Ed asked gruffly.

Matt scowled and rubbed his hands together.

"I've been lookin' into Johnny's record," Ed went on. "It was Myra who got me started. I'll bet I can clean up half the charges against him."

"What about the other half?"

"With a little help, those too. You know, twice during the past year Johnny's supposed to have been mixed up in bank robberies. Well, all the time he's been living on a ranch below the Border under another name. He doesn't know that I know that."

Matt's scowl grew deeper. "Maybe I've been wrong about the kid."

Ed grinned. "That Rand was mighty smart. He held me prisoner, tagged me with his crimes an' meant to kill me an' leave me to be found when his luck started to run out."

"But that first murder, Ed. How did—"

"That first miner who was killed wasn't the miner who made the strike in the Kiowas. He was a fellow who worked with Rand. He had killed the man who found the gold and had robbed him. I saw him in town an' he looked familiar. I got to puzzlin' over who he was an' decided to follow him an' ask him some questions. When I caught up with him we shot it out. I took his gold an' started back for town. On the way I bumped into Rand. By that time I was on the road where the trail didn't show what happened. Rand brought me here an' sent a man to ride my horse toward the pass."

"As simple as that," Matt mused.

Ed got to his feet. "As simple as that. Suppose you stay here, Matt. I'll ride down into the valley an' get Myra. On the way I'll figure out something to tell her father. I've got a notion Johnny'll like what he finds when he wakes up."

THE RED TIDE

A novelette of wilderness freighters—painted for war

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

CHAPTER ONE

Runaway Partner

ACCIDENTS always pick the worst time to happen. The trouble was, Jim Monahan realized after his first wild outburst of anger, he had pushed

his horse too fast. The roan was dead-beat, rocking on his feet, in no shape to jump the cutbank. He had tried, as if

The Indians left destruction and mutilated death in their wake . . .



Jim Monahan moved relentlessly over the prairie, praying like hell that he wouldn't be too late to catch and square things with the runaway partner who'd copped his four thousand dollars, never realizing that between himself and the red death sweeping the frontier—stood only Mrs. McGaa's old milk cow!

OF MASSACRE

driven by the same wild impatience prodding Jim Monahan. But the roan's hind legs didn't quite make the far bank, and he had slipped; and now the animal lay in the cutbank with a broken back.

Drawing his new repeating rifle from

the saddle scabbard, Monahan put a bullet into the horse's head.

"Maybe I can borrow a mount at the McGaa place!" he said to himself after he had killed the horse.

Leaving the saddle and bridle, he



started running across the prairie. Abruptly he swore at himself for being a fool, and eased into a dogtrot which he could maintain for miles.

It was good news which had Jim Monahan in such a fury of impatience—and the need for prompt action. He was returning to his homestead, now, from a fast trip to Kansas City, a day earlier than he had told his partner to expect him because he had been far more successful than he had expected.

At Two Rivers, Jim Monahan had built up a horse ranch from nothing—on land he had pre-empted, cabin and corals he himself had constructed, stocked with horses he had earned by peeling broncs for other stockmen and bought with money earned by locating squatters on quarter-sections still open for filing.

He had taken in a partner who had some cash, Pete Nolan. With Nolan's money he had bought two stagecoaches and set up a small line linking settlements along the Solomon and Republican Rivers. In Kansas City, now, he had put a big deal across with the Kansas City-Santa Fe Stage Lines. He had shrewdly argued the big transcontinental outfit into leasing his ranch and equipment as a feeder to their main line. They would put more horses and vehicles on his place. He would be manager of a division with sizeable salaries and a share in profits for himself and Nolan! And *that* good luck was just a starter.

The stage company wanted his partner's signature to the contracts. As soon as he brought the signed papers back, they would make a big payment on the lease to his ranch. And Jim Monahan had plans for the use of that money. Immediate plans. Big plans, tremendous plans! Just thought of them now popped the sweat out on his lean, rugged face and made him increase his pace to a wild run again.

"Ease up," he warned himself then. "Don't kill yourself yet. Just wait a little while and you can die rich!"

Jim Monahan was just twenty-two. Stocky of build, red-haired and gray-eyed, he possessed a pantherish strength of muscle and a youthful, arrogant pride in his own resourcefulness and self reliance. Everything he'd ever got, he'd got

for himself. And there were a lot of other things—land, money, reputation—that he intended to get.

The McGaa ranch on Breshy Creek made Jim's lip curl whenever he passed, it was kept up so poorly. The first homesteader had abandoned the place. It was now run by the Widow McGaa and her kid brother, and it still looked abandoned. Widow McGaa sorely needed a man on the place.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Monahan!" came the polite voice of Widow McGaa.

The widow came around the corner of the shack just as he had opened his mouth to call the house. She always talked polite that way. She was a thin little thing—Well, not exactly thin in that faded gingham dress, but little and—Gosh, he hadn't realized she was so young! Pretty, too!

"Can I borrow your horse?" he blurted, realizing that he was reddening under her gaze. She had nice blue eyes.

"Why," said the widow, "Benny is just saddling Tiptoe to go look for our cow. She strayed off yesterday and didn't come back to be milked."

"I've got to borrow your horse!" Monahan growled. "Forget about that old muley. I'll buy you another cow next week," he said recklessly. "I've got to have a horse!"

She seemed to take on a lot of dignity and distance. "That's very kind of you, I'm sure, but—"

"I'll pay you for the horse and the cow," he interrupted, "just for the loan of the mare! I'll pay you ten times over! It's—desp'rately important!"

"No!"

"You got to do me this favor!" he pleaded. "So help me, six months from now I'll buy this whole ranch off you for ten times what it's worth!"

"I'm just trying to say," she finally got it, "that you're welcome to borrow Tiptoe. For nothing," she added icily.

Five minutes later, as Monahan raced toward his own homestead, he kept thinking of Widow McGaa. Young, pretty, and perky.

I'll do something for her when we rake in that bonanza, he thought. She doesn't belong out here on the raw prairie. . . .

JIM MONAHAN'S ranch was at the junction of the Solomon and Kansas Rivers, far from any settlement and far from any sheriff or friendly neighbors who might come running with loaded shotguns at time of need. Nevertheless, this spot would be important some day.

Jim was feeling good again as he approached the homestead on the river trail. He was thinking how Pete Nolan's eyes were going to pop when he told his news. Pete was a noisy hombre; he would throw his sombrero high in the air. He would shout. He would leap into the air and click his heels and howl like a panther. Jim had reined Tiptoe to a walk to let the mare cool off at the end of her long run. And that was all which saved Jim. He reined up instantly when he saw the four men at his corrals.

"Funny!" he muttered. "Nobody but Pete's supposed to be there?"

His pulse suddenly stuttering, he dismounted, drew Tiptoe into a clump of willows and tied her. Then, taking his rifle, he dodged through the brush and high grass toward the spread. The gathering dusk helped him. Presently he stopped. The four men were busy and Pete Nolan was not among them.

They had saddled Jim's best horses and were driving all his stock out of the corrals! They were looting his cabin, too. They had hitched up a big wagon and were loading all his supplies onto it.

"So help me, they're *thieves*! Monahan thought. They must've killed Pete!"

With this realization came another appalling thought. Aside from what these men might have done to his partner, Jim foresaw how they were ruining his hopes. He needed his horses and equipment to make good his contract with the Kansas City-Santa Fe Stage Lines. Otherwise his plans would burst right in his face.

"I've got to run them off, damn 'em!" he muttered hoarsely. "If they've killed Pete, I'll herd 'em clear to Leavenworth to see 'em hang!"

But they were four to his one. Mad as he was, he still had sense. Indian-fashion, he stomachached to the back of the sod-house stables.

Then he heard footsteps. He leaped to his feet, rifle leveled—and around the

near corner of the stables walked a man. Jim swung the rifle butt and caught the man just back of the ear and dropped him senseless to the ground.

Then Jim stole along the side of the building. Over at his cabin, two of the thieves were still loading the wagon. Carefully, moving along the corral fence, Jim approached them.

"Where'll I stow this bacon?" one man asked.

"Back of the flour barrel."

They were busy stowing that bacon in the wagon when Jim stepped close behind them.

"Lift your hands!" he grated. "Quick!"

They turned and for an instant just stood there, staring. Then one hombre yelled, "Mike!" and they flung themselves apart, both going for their guns.

Jim triggered his rifle, and the slug knocked one man spinning back against the wagon with a smashed shoulder. The other hombre's pistol blazed, and lead slashed along Jim's ribs as he jumped for the hombre and with rifle-butt knocked him sprawling to the dirt. Jim kicked the pistol from the fellow's hand.

"What the hell!"

Jim whirled. That fourth man, Mike, had come running from the stables. As Jim turned Mike whipped pistol from holster. His .44 was leveled before Jim could reach his own pistol.

"Don't move," Mike snapped.

"You mangy thieves!" Jim raged at them. "What did you do to Pete Nolan? Shoot him in the back?"

"What in hell d'you mean, *thieves*?" Mike demanded angrily.

"What in hell would you call yourselves?" Jim retorted. "Driving a man's stock out of his corrals, taking his horses, and looting his cabin of supplies?"

"*Looting*!" the other echoed, his deep voice rising in a shout of surprise and fury. "Damn it, man, we've *bought* this outfit. Horses, supplies—everything!"

Jim's innards turned suddenly cold.

"B-But you couldn't have! Pete Nolan wouldn't—"

"Pete Nolan *did*, damn it! We paid four thousand dollars, cash, for this spread, and here's Nolan's bill of sale to prove it!"

The man was fishing a paper from his pocket. He held it out for Jim to glance over.

"It's witnessed, too, by that parson from Walnut Grove. He was riding past and we asked 'im in. Hell's fire, we ought to string you up, coming here and shooting up my partner. Who in blazes are you, anyhow? If anybody's a thief, by God you're the man!"

"I'm Jim Monahan. I own this spread. I mean, Pete Nolan and I—"

"Used to own it," the other snapped. He stared at Jim silently a moment; his voice was suspicious as he said, "Nolan didn't say nothin' about a partner."

"I owned this spread originally," Jim said heavily. "I took Nolan in as a partner, and left him here when I went into town."

Abruptly the other man thrust his six-gun back into holster. It wasn't Jim's words of explanation which convinced him as much as it was the stunned, unbelieving dismay on Jim's bronzed young face.

"Where is Nolan?" Jim asked.

"Why, he took the money we paid him and rode off east. Don't know where he was headed."

CHAPTER TWO

Monahan's Cow

JIM'S suspicions fired into certainty. Nolan had been worried. Pete had regretted sinking his cash into this ranch. Nolan was a likeable hombre, a pleasant chap who liked yarning and partying a damn sight more than he liked hard work. He had seen a chance to get his cash out of the ranch, with some profit, and had grabbed that chance.

"Good Lord, Monahan," Mike blurted, "you reckon your partner sold you out and skipped with the money?"

Jim didn't answer. Biting off a heart-sick oath under his breath, he turned to the man whom he had wounded and helped him get to his feet.

Huskily Jim said, "Old-timer, I'm sorry as hell about this. Let's get you bandaged up."

"You're sorry! You cripple a man and say you're sorry!" the other yelled, his

voice shaky with pain; and, hysterically, he smashed his left fist at Jim's face. The blow rocked Monahan; but he steadied himself and did not say anything. Into the cabin he helped the injured man, and there he took clean cloths from a locker to use for bandages. The throbbing ache of that savage blow to the jaw was as nothing to the shock of loss and despair in Jim's heart.

"How long ago did Nolan leave?" Jim asked.

"About two hours."

Jim's firm young lips tightened. "Headed east, he'll cross the river at Meecham's Ferry. But the river's in flood, and old man Meechan won't cross till the water's gone down some. Say, by tomorrow night. By God, maybe I can get to Meecham's in time to catch him!"

"Take a fresh horse, lad," Mike urged. "You sure had bad luck."

"No. Bad judgment," Monahan said wearily, "I shouldn't've trusted Nolan!"

Riding a fresh horse and leading the mare he'd borrowed from Mrs. McGaa, he started eastward across the prairie. The night was dark, without a moon; a haze dimmed the stars. His own mood was just as dark. So high had been his hopes!

For, with the money which the Santa Fe-Kansas City Stage Lines was to pay him on leasing his ranch and equipment, Jim had planned to buy land surrounding the little hamlet of Two Rivers on the junction of the North and South forks of the Solomon.

He already had options on most of the homesteads of that section. A year ago he had shrewdly foreseen the movement, now afoot, to organize the district as a county. Two Rivers was the logical site of a county seat. And a county seat always mushroomed in size as all the trade and legal business of surrounding territory flowed into it.

A town lot in a new county seat was worth a good \$100—and a damn sight more when the town became a real metropolis. The land on which Jim had options would include more than five thousand town lots! So, if his hunch proved sound, Jim had been figuring, he and Pete would have owned land worth half a million dollars!

But now his hopes were ruined. Now he would have no money to buy that land on which he had options. Years of hard work had been for nothing.

"Damn him! Pete runs out on me just when we're about fixed for life!" Jim's mouth hardened. "God, I hope I can catch him!"

He could just see the consternation that would come to lanky Pete Nolan's face if he confronted Pete at Meecham's. Pete would turn livid. Pete would start talking, fast. *But I won't listen. I'll tell him, Your gun's in your belt. Pull it, quick!*

Then, Jim planned, he would go on east to the Little Blue, where his friend Luke Cagle had a ranch. From Cagle he'd borrow a wagon and a team of mules. Then he would head up into Nebraska. At Tekamah, the Army was building a fort for protection of immigrants coming into the territory against the Indians. As more and more settlers came onto the prairie, the game grew less and less. The Indians were resenting white encroachment. Flare-ups were coming increasingly frequent. Old-timers were predicting that unless a line of forts were built through the country, and built soon, the Sioux and Cheyenne would sweep the settlements with a red flame of massacre. Freightings for the Army would pay well. As his savings grew, Jim planned, he would buy another wagon outfit. Start all over. Thinking of it, though, brought him no pleasure.



HE REACHED the Widow McGaa's place before sun-up. To his surprise, a lamp was burning in the window. And as he dismounted, the door of the shack opened and Mary McGaa's slim, girlish figure was outlined against the lamplight.

"I've brought back your horse," Jim called.

"Oh, thanks," she said. Jim didn't know much about young women; but it seemed to him that her low voice was very troubled.

"I'm headin' east," he said. "I sure appreciate you lettin' me use the mare."

"Mr. Monahan!" She walked toward

him. "I've got to ask a favor of you!"

Foot in stirrup, he was about to remount. He hesitated.

"Gosh, Missus McGaa," Monahan muttered. "I'm in an awful hurry to get to Meecham's Ferry."

"B-but I need help so desperately!" she breathed.

"What's wrong?"

"My cow still hasn't come back and—"

"Your cow!" he burst out. "You want me to waste my time hunting your damned old—"

"Never mind!" she burst in on him furiously. "I don't want your help, I don't need your help!" But tears were starting down her face. "I'll g-go hunt by myself—"

She was gathering the reins of the tired Tiptoe horse, and then trying to mount from the wrong side.

Jim stifled a deep groan. After begging her for a favor yesterday, he couldn't turn her down now, no matter what.

"All right, all right, I'll find your blamed cow. Just go inside and cook your breakfast."

But she had actually swung into saddle. The mare was too tired to object at being mounted from the wrong side. Mary McGaa said tremulously, "I'm going with you!"

Jim stifled another groan. She would slow him up. Now, just where would a wandering old milk cow stray? Not to the south. The river blocked that way. Nor to the east, where prairie fires had taken the grass. That left the north and west, over to the recently abandoned Lucas homestead.

"Say," he asked abruptly, "when did you last put out a chunk of rock salt for your cow?"

"Salt?" she echoed, mystified. "You give cows salt?"

"Oh, Lord!" he muttered. "Bet I can lead you straight to that wanderin' bossy of yours." And straight to the abandoned Lucas spread he led her.

Old Man Lucas had been running some cattle on the homestead, before his wife died of loneliness and overwork. Jim figured that somewhere along the little crick, where Lucas had put out salt, they would find the McGaa cow. And they did. The

placid beast looked mildly at them as they approached, and continued to graze.

"Maybe you'd better milk her," Jim suggested.

"Oh, she isn't really fresh any more," Mary McGaa said.

She said it off-handedly; and she wasn't even looking at the cow, she was looking around at the prairie, and her pretty face—instead of looking pleased at finding the cow—looked more worried than ever.

"Well, I'll ride, now," Jim muttered. "I'm in a big hurry—"

"Mr. Monahan!" It burst out of her like a plea.

"What now!" He didn't realize it, but he was shouting.

"My brother. Benny left last night to find the cow. He left afoot and he hasn't come home at all. I'm so *terribly* worried!"

"Good Lord, he'll come home! There's nothing to hurt him on the prairie!"

"Nothing except wolves and rattle-snakes and Indians and—and starvation, and sunstroke—"

"He won't starve overnight and the moon won't give you sunstroke!" he shouted.

"Don't yell at me!" she burst out; then her sweet face was in her hands and she was crying.

"Please," he said, after a moment. "Don't cry, Mrs. McGaa."

"My name's Mary." She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I don't *want* to cry. I hate c-crying women!"

Jim looked at the sun. It was already high. And already any chance of his reaching Meecham's by dusk was very slim.

"I'll tie the cow's halter to your saddle horn, Mrs.—I mean, Mary. So you can lead her home."

"Never mind the cow! Let's hunt for Benny!"

Nevertheless, he dismounted, and picked up the cow's halter rope and started toward Mary's horse. Abruptly he stopped.

There were stains on the end of the halter rope. Ominous dark red stains. Jim's heart did a queer flipflop in his chest.

Bloodstains! His prairie training made him sweep the sky for the grim, dark,

soaring dots of buzzards. He saw none, and his heart eased out of his throat. He tossed the halter down.

"All right, we won't bother with the cow. Mary, I got a hunch Benny is somewhere around the Lucas place."

Mary caught a sharp breath as she looked at him, and her blue eyes seemed to widen with fear. She had guessed from his manner that he had dark forebodings about Benny.

He led the way to the sagging old Lucas cabin and out-buildings.

"Maybe the boy went inside and lay down for a snooze."

"No. He'd never do that, knowing I was waiting up for him!"

Jim yelled, "Hey, Benny!" And drawing his pistol, Jim fired three shots into the air.

He and Mary listened, then.

Abruptly Jim started. Seemed as if—Mary gasped, "I heard him! He's answered!"

Again Jim yelled, "*Benn-n-y!*"

Definitely, this time, he heard a faint yell.

Bewilderedly Jim glanced around at the flat, empty prairie. It was uncanny, eerie. It was disturbing. It seemed that the answer he had heard had been a faint, despairing yell of "*Help!*"

Jim spurred his horse toward the Lucas cabin. "Come on, Mary! He must be over there somewhere!"

CHAPTER THREE

Damnation Hole

BUT young Benny wasn't in the cabin, nor in the barn. Jim's bewilderment deepening, he stared around over the prairie again. "Benny doesn't seem to be anywhere around," he said.

"But he is! I heard him!" Mary insisted. "Ben-n-n-ny!" she called again.

And again came a muffled, hollow, desperate yell of "*Help!*"

Jim bit off an oath. He started running.

On the far side of the cabin he found what he sought. He flung himself down flat on his stomach, and peered down into a hole in the ground. It was a well,

an old prairie well, an abandoned well out here where diggers had to go a hundred and more feet to reach water. Damn Old Man Lucas! Going off and leaving a well covered by rotten old boards.

"Benny!" Jim yelled.

"Get me out of here!"

"Benny, darling, are you all right?" Mary called.

"Sure, but get me out, sis!"

Mary whispered, "Jim, he's hurt! I can tell by his voice!"

"At that, he's lucky," Jim retorted.

"Usually there's black damp in an old well, to suffocate a man—or enough water to drown 'im."

Jim went to their horses, and from the saddlehorns took the lariats. Then he rode back to the cow and took her long halter. He tied the ropes together and fastened one end to a stout timber and laid the timber across the top of the well.

"Benny, I'm letting down a rope," he shouted. "Tie it around your chest."

"Can't. The rope doesn't come down low enough," Benny answered presently. "Besides, I busted my arm."

Jim said, "Mary, I'll have to go down after him."

He spoke reassuringly; but as he looked at the sun—fairly leaping toward noon—he groaned inwardly. He'd be so damned late to Meecham's Ferry!

Back against one side of the well, his feet braced against the opposite side, Jim lowered himself into the deep hole in the ground. Musty, age-old smells of damp and rot and stagnation made his nostrils quiver. And as he went deeper and deeper, he fought back a touch of wild, primitive panic. So much like a *trap* this hole was!

"I'm coming, Benny!" he called.

Queer, how his voice boomed so hollowly. Lord, the kid was lucky! Travelers didn't come this way. Ordinarily, a man down here was stuck, to go mad with hunger and despair.

Abruptly, Jim discovered that he had reached the end of the rope. But he wasn't at the bottom yet! He stared down. The water was a dozen feet lower.

"How deep is the water, Benny?"

"I don't know, sir," Benny said unsteadily.

He was twelve, Benny; and polite, like his sister.

"Aren't you standing on bottom?" Jim asked sharply.

"No, sir. I've been holding onto a plank in the curbing."

"When did you fall in?"

"About an hour after dark. I found the cow, but going home I got lost. I followed a trail toward a house, and next thing I knew I was falling. I had hold of the cow's halter, but it burned my hands and I couldn't hang on. I kept fallin' and fallin'. I can't hang on much longer, sir!"

The kid had been clinging to that plank all night! Just about all in, now. Well . . . Jim caught a deep breath and let go of the rope.

He plummeted straight down. Noisome water closed with a shock over his head. For an instant he struck out frantically to pull his head above surface. His face lifted into air and he caught a gasping breath.

The kid was gone!

Jim realized his feet were sinking in soft muck. If he did not struggle, he could keep his head out, for the water came just to his neck. But he did struggle . . . he groped wildly until he found Benny, and lifted him so that his head was out of water.

"Ease up, you're all right," Jim said.

Then Jim tried to figure what to do next. Climb up the side of the well, carrying Benny, until he could reach the rope? Impossible. The wall curbing down here was of slimy, rotten wood.

"Mary!" Jim yelled.

"Yes? Can you bring Benny up?"

"The rope's too short to reach us. Tie another piece of rope to the end of this one."

"Where'll I get another piece?"

"Ride home and get it!" he shouted. "And hurry!"

"I will!" she promised—and departed instantly.

But evidently she forgot the promise.

♦ ♦ ♦

FOR the minutes dragged past like crippled eternities, stretching into a full hour, and still she wasn't back. Then a second hour; and the slanting

(Continued on page 107)

BOOTS OF DESTINY

By DOUGLAS NELSON RHODES

THE roaring bonfire's greedy yellow and red fingers reached up into the midnight sky and cast a flickering glow upon the weathered features of the handful of frontier townsmen knotted about it. In the distance, a half mile away, the oil lamps of Pendleton town shone feebly across the mesquite plain. A bearded range rider threw a last armload of brush on the roaring fire.

"There!" he bawled. "Reckon that oughta make it hot enough to singe the hide of even a devil like Chet Redburn! All set fer the ceremony, Doc?"

Doctor Harry Burton, Pendleton's venerable sawbones, stepped forward into the firelight. The doc was a dignified,

spare-framed old man in an age-greened frock coat that bulged slightly at his hip where it was drawn over his holstered sixgun. Burton held something in his hand which claimed the rigid attention of all present. It was a pair of yellow shoes but slightly worn—ordinary button-high-tops, they seemed to be at first glance—of a style sported by tenderfoot drummers and Eastern cartridge salesmen. The frontier surgeon dangled the shoes by their boot-straps from the tips of his fingers as if they were something unclean—as if even their very touch was contaminating.

"Citizens of Pendleton," Doc Burton began, "under ordinary circumstances I'm

He came through Pendleton,
shooting and yelling.



*Gun law and a pair
of yellow shoes had
the drop on hell-
roaring Pendleton
town—until a wise
old sawbones
burned a witch and
broke the jinx!*

not a superstitious man, but this here affair is different. You all know the story of these shoes and how the Mark of Death seems to follow whoever has anything to do with them.

"It's got the whole town plumb jittery, and we all agree that it is time somethin' was done about it—that's why we're here tonight. It ain't exactly that they're made from the hide of a human varmint. It's more than that. It's because these here shoes are the symbol of vengeance and lawlessness that the honest, law-abidin' folk have sworn to stamp out!"

He held the shoes up so that all might see them for the last time. In the red glare of the bonfire they appeared flesh-colored and alive—with the evil, malignant vitality of a gun-crazy killer. The doc drew back his hand to throw them into the heart of the flames.

"I hereby consign the last mortal remains of Chet Redburn to follow his ornery soul into the hell-fires of damnation!"

With that declaration, he flung the yellow shoes into the roaring inferno.

The little group, headed by the doctor, then turned away and mounted their horses for the short ride back to town. Each of them heaved a sigh of relief that the task was done. Now, perhaps, the end of gun-law and violence in Pendleton was finally in sight. At least they were convinced the town was once more free of Chet Redburn's black influence and the shoes of vengeance fashioned from the skin of his mortal body.



THE strange true story of the end of Chet Redburn and Pendleton's boots of Destiny is one of the most unusual in the history of the early West. The midnight drama on the plains outside Pendleton in 1870 marked the end of a tale which began with Redburn's hell-

for-leather ride into town several months earlier.

Pendleton, in the Seventies, was a rough-and-tumble settlement, but the law-abiding element managed to keep the upper hand. Fights and killings were commonplace, but for the most part these took place between hot-tempered range riders and gunmen who came to town bent on having a good time—which meant first a binge, and then trouble. As a rule, the townspeople were left strictly alone, and so long as they minded their own business harm seldom came to them.

But Chet Redburn, outlaw, gunfighter, and all-around bad man, failed to observe this unwritten law. He came tearing through Pendleton one day, shooting, yelling, and behaving generally in the manner that was characteristic of the gun-toting, swaggering gentry of his class.

A small boy, playing in the street, became confused at the din and darted directly into the path of Redburn's plunging mount. A scream of agony and the child's body lay crumpled and still in the dust while the horse and its wild-shooting rider continued the mad dash through town. Redburn did not even glance back, but pulled up to the Glory Gulch Saloon, some distance away.

"The best red likker fer a red-blooded, thirstin' gent!" was his command to the bartender, who slid a bottle of red-eye toward him.

Redburn cast a wary glance about the saloon in search of a marshal's star. Seeing none among the six loungers, he turned back to the bar.

Redburn feared no man, but the mounting reward for his capture to face charges of horse-stealing, rustling, stage hold-ups, and murder, bade him be careful.

Chet had just downed his third drink when the doorway was darkened by the entrance of a tall young man of eighteen whose face bore an expression of grief mingled with anger.

"That your horse outside?" the youth demanded, choking back a sob.

"It is now," Redburn replied with a short laugh. "The hombre who used to own him asked me the same question—jist before he cashed in his chips."

The youth stepped forward, his body quivering with rage. Redburn squared away to leave his gun-arm free for action. He noticed the kid was unarmed.

"You killed my little brother!" the boy cried. "Ran him down—and didn't even stop to see what you had done! What kind of a man are you—you with your reckless ridin' and your reckless talk?"

Chet's eyes narrowed. "So, you don't like my ridin', nor my talkin', either, eh, kid? Well, ain't that a cryin' shame!" Redburn mocked. "Now git back to yer ma—" he spat "—before I add another brat scalp tuh my belt today!"

The saloon patrons, tough frontiersmen all, stood in stunned silence at the callousness of this man who gloried in the needless tragedy his carelessness had perpetrated.

At that crack the kid went for the outlaw with bare fists. Chet's hand slapped leather. Two .44 slugs drilled a neat pair of holes in the boy's forehead. He was dead before his body hit the floor. Redburn turned and covered the watchers.

"Not a move," he snarled. "I'll blast the first man who even blinks!"

"Drop that gun, stranger!" a voice behind Redburn said. The muzzle of a Colt was pressed against his backbone. Redburn knew then that his number was up. His sixgun clattered to the floor. He turned.

"Chet Redburn!" Deputy Marshal Hendricks gasped.

A crowd of townsfolk gathered as Redburn was led away to the jail. Outraged, they cried for swift, lynch-law justice.

"He killed the Harper boys—both of 'em—and in cold blood!"

"Lynch the dirty killer! Let's string him up!"

A rope was snatched from a saddle horn; the hands of an avenging mob tore Chet Redburn from his captor. In a few moments he was kicking air beneath the stout branch of a cottonwood tree.

The body was left hanging over night as an object lesson to other gun-loco bullies. Next morning several citizens arrived to cut down the body and remove it to the local Boothill. They were astonished to find Redburn's clothes torn off and a couple of square feet of his skin removed. It had been done skillfully by someone accustomed to working many years with hides.

"A professional job, right enough," declared one of the burying committee. "Only one man hereabouts can cut leather like that—Cobbler Joe Harper, the boys' pa!"

"God-fearin' man, Joe Harper," said another, "but a powerful vengeful cuss when he's riled. Wonder why he did this."



NO ONE questioned the bereaved shoemaker about the mutilating of Redburn's body. Gruesome though the act was, none could feel it in his heart to blame the cobbler for venting his rage born of grief in any manner he saw fit. But the residents of Pendleton couldn't help wondering what he planned to do with Redburn's skin. There was much speculation on the subject.

"What would any shoemaker do with leather?" reasoned one tough old-timer. "Make shoes out of it, o' course!" Women shuddered at the thought; men just shook their heads in disbelief. Harper, himself, volunteered no explanation and admitted nothing. Always tight-lipped and distant in his dealings with others, he shunned the society of his fellow townsmen even more.

Harper did, however, continue to attend church at the little chapel on the edge of town. Dressed in his Sunday best, the cobbler, who was a widower, sat alone and always left promptly at the conclusion of the services. He acknowledged greeting with a solemn nod, but as usual, had little or nothing to say.

Then a couple of Sundays after the lynching, Joe Harper appeared in church wearing a brand new pair of yellow shoes; soft leather hightops, with buttons, like those worn by eastern dudes. Such shoes were seldom seen in Pendleton where the prevailing style in footgear was limited to high-heeled cow-poke boots or coarse brogans for all occasions.

The services had already begun when Harper entered and tip-toed quietly to his seat. The eyes of those in the congregation turned instantly to Harper's new yellow shoes and remained rooted there. A murmur of subdued excitement rippled through the assemblage. The preacher broke off his sermon and he, too, stared in fascination at the cobbler's feet.

"Brother Harper," intoned the preacher solemnly, after a long pause, "I must remind you that this is God's House. There is no place in it for those who bear hatred in their hearts toward either the living or the dead. 'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord! Under the circumstances, Brother Harper, I have no choice but to ask you to leave at once!"

Without a word or change of expression, Joe Harper retraced his steps and marched quietly out of the church. Nor did he ever return.

In a short time the story was spread all over Oregon of how the Pendleton cobbler had made himself a pair of shoes out of the skin of his sons' killer.

It had no effect on his business, however, because Harper was not only a fine craftsman, but also he was the only cobbler within twenty miles of Pendleton.

Several months passed. Then one day

a burly stranger rode up and dismounted in front of Harper's shop. He entered and found the shoemaker at work.

"I come to git a pair of shoes," said the stranger. "A pair of yeller shoes." His sixgun pointed at Harper's head. By way of explanation he added, "Chet Redburn was my pardner!"

Silently, Harper led the way to his living quarters in the rear.

Passersby heard a .44 bark twice and a moment later the stranger emerged from the shop, a smoking Colt in one hand, the yellow shoes in the other. He was on his horse and out of town before anyone could stop him.

Deputy Hendricks took the trail in pursuit as soon as he learned of Harper's murder. He returned an hour later with the shoes dangling from his saddle horn. The stranger's body was lashed on behind.

"No, I didn't kill him," the peace officer told the crowd. "He was dead when I came up. I reckon his horse stepped into a gopher hole an' throwed him. His neck's broke."

Deputy Hendricks took the shoes home and stowed them away for safekeeping, pending the winding up of Harper's affairs.

Next day Hendricks was killed in a gun duel with a drunken cowhand he was trying to arrest for disturbing the peace.

Blackie Herman, the town marshal returned from chasing rustlers to learn of his deputy's death. He took charge of the shoes along with Hendricks' personal effects, and placed them in his safe. Within a week he, too, was taken to Boothill—the victim of knife wounds sustained in a barroom brawl.



STORIES began to circulate to the effect that there was a curse upon the yellow shoes, a curse engendered by the evilness of Chet Redburn. Wild

rumors swept Pendleton. Some said the town itself was doomed unless the shoes were disposed of, once and for all. The frontier village was jumpy and a wave of gun fights and killings broke out.

Finally, Tom Benny, the newly elected marshal, sought out Doc Burton, Pendleton's wise old sawbones.

"Somethin's got to be done, Doc," he said in despair. "Besides, I got them damned shoes in my possession. Accordin' to law, I'm supposed to retain custody of 'em till Harper's business is cleared up, but I don't mind admittin' I wish they was burnin' in Hell along with the rest of Chet Redburn!"

"That's an idea," the Doc replied. "This situation calls for more than man-made law. Get a citizen's committee together and we'll hold a public ceremony to break this jinx that's got a hold on Pendleton. We'll cremate what's left of Chet and all he stood for. Yes, sir, a good old-fashioned witch-burnin' is just what this town needs to bust the hex."

So that is why the people of Pendleton gathered one midnight to burn a pair of yellow shoes on the outskirts of town.

But there is a bit more to the story:

When Joe Harper's belongings were finally sorted over, the marshal made an astonishing discovery. Again he quietly looked up Doc Burton, and laid his find before the sawbones.

"Look what I found tucked away in his trunk," he said.

The Doc took the two pieces of leather that the other handed him. They were soft like chamois, irregular in shape, and a golden tan in color. Both had been carefully tanned and oiled. Chalk lines on them indicated a pattern had been used to mark off the various parts that go to make up a pair of shoes.

"Them shoes we burnt wasn't made out of Redburn's hide, at all!" gasped the marshal. "These here pieces match up with the hide that was missin' off him! I kin understand now what happened. Harper skinned him, all right, but when he went to make it up into shoes he couldn't bring himself to do it. Why, them yeller shoes was made from common calfskin, like any others! We was so all-fired sure they was part of Redburn's carcass, we never even thought to ask Joe if it was so. Bein' close-mouthed by nature anyway, he let us keep right on thinkin' so!"

Doc Burton nodded. "And it's best to let 'em keep on thinkin' so, too," he said. "I've been worried a little for fear somebody'd find out the truth."

"You knowed all the time?" expostulated the marshal.

"Not until the night we held our witch-burnin'," admitted the old sawbones. "But I realized the truth the minute I touched them shoes. You see, Marshal, it's part of my trade to be familiar with epidermolysis—that's the study of skin structure. I'd be a helluva doctor if I couldn't tell human skin from cowhide!"

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of 10 Story Western Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1942. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the 10 Story Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, a true statement of the August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Henry Steeger, bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, holders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; and that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me 20th day of October, 1942. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 12, Register's No. 415629. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

One member of that citizens committee, Editor Brant Jackson knew, was a traitor, a thief and a murderer, and there was only one way to kill him—hand him an overdose of printer's ink!



Two Colts roared almost simultaneously in the sudden silence.

HELL'S FIVE-STAR FINAL

By M. HOWARD LANE

WEARINESS lay in Brant Jackson's eyes as he inked the plates of his Washington press and went to work. It was after midnight and he'd be lucky if the job at hand was done by dawn.

"My own damn fault I got it to do," Brant muttered, and then he knew that he was just talking to hear himself talk. It wasn't his fault, nor was it the fault of his weekly *Clarion* which had been hammering at the gold-mining citizens of La Paz for a long time. It was the fault of the outlaws rodding this Arizona gold camp.

As he had said in a flaming front page

Clarion editorial only that afternoon:

La Paz is called the Hub of Hell from Los Angeles to Phoenix, and the name is no misnomer. Never in the history of this state has there been a town where the streets were washed nightly with blood as they are here.

It is not safe for honest men to walk out after dark. Nay. It is hardly safe for them to be abroad in bright day!

A few weeks ago we advocated the formation of a Citizens Committee to enforce law and order based on the credo that all men are created equal, with equal opportunity to better themselves. Better themselves, but not at the point of a sixgun!

A committee was formed, and such a committee imported a lawman, noted for his

two-fisted courage and integrity. He stayed for exactly one week, and left by stage to Yuma. Said stage was held up, and said lawman murdered by parties unknown. But it is known that the lawman came to us virtually penniless, and that when the bandits searched his body, Bucktooth Suggs, the driver, saw them recover a money-belt weighted literally with pounds of gold dust. As a man soweth so shall he reap! Since that experience the La Paz mining district has been without law. What is the matter with our Citizens Committee? Is there no decent lawman in Arizona ready to rise to the challenge of outlawry? No man above bribery that they can find to rid this town of the strutting gunslingers who walk our streets and boast of the notches on their gun-butts?

This writer thinks there is, and *The Clarion* feels that it is up to the Citizens Committee to act now while there is yet time.

That was the editorial which was the cause of his sleepless night now. It had stung the Citizens Committee into almost instant action, and among one of two dozen members, Brant had been invited to attend a meeting that evening in the big general store of its chairman, Henry Woodal.

Woodal had greeted *The Clarion's* editor with a shaking fist that clutched a newspaper. "Sir," he had thundered for the benefit of a lot of worried-looking La Paz citizens, "I take this editorial of yours as a personal affront! We have tried our level best to find a marshal we can trust who will be able to cope with the situation here in La Paz, and we have been unable to locate a man willing to accept the responsibility—even at a salary of five hundred dollars per month. Unless you can offer us some solution, I must demand that you retract that editorial."

Henry Woodal was a big man with a soft paunch that shook when he spoke. Luxuriant burnsidies dropped to his quivering jowls. An impressive, affable gentleman on most occasions, anger had twisted his face.

"I ain't sore," Asa Keyes, the hulking blacksmith, said mildly. "Pears to me, Jackson's got the right of it. We'd better do something."

"We've got to do something!" That, as Brant had measured it, constituted the opinion of the committee.

Finally, addressing them all, he had said gravely, "There's one scheme you

haven't tried. Mebbe, if we work it right, we can *shame* some decent lawman into coming to La Paz!"

"And how you going to do that?" Henry Woodal had calmed down.

Brant had answered him with a quiet smile. "If you gentlemen authorize it, I'll guarantee to have two hundred circulars printed before morning, stating the facts of the case, and *challenging* any and all professional lawmen to put in their bids to clean up this hub of hell.

"My Mexican assistant will deliver the dodgers to every camp in this La Paz district, and I'll see to it that the packet now tied up at the river landing will have a hundred dodgers for Yuma.

Asa Keyes, the blacksmith, had lumbered to his feet. "That cuts 'er, gents," he'd said in his great voice. "La Paz is the laughing stock of all Arizony right now. And yore poster, Jackson, plus talk in other towns will bring us the kind of gun-marshal we want. I move we accept Jackson's suggestion!"

Thunderous ayes sounded.

Brant had answered the acclaim with a tight little smile, and grave, warning words. "Before I take on this job," he'd told the committee, "I must demand one promise. For the protection of my rider, Tomas Lopez, it will be necessary to keep the results of our meeting tonight a closely guarded secret. If the outlaw fraternity here in La Paz should get wind of our plan, Tomas would probably get waylaid and killed."

"That's just plain common sense," Henry Woodal agreed heartily. "We sure don't want anything to happen to Tomas—or you, sir!"

"Thanks," Brant had murmured drily. Henry Woodal seemed to have forgotten his previous anger.

As the dodgers with **LAWMAN WANTED**, printed in bold face type across the top of each sheet, came rolling off the press, Brant remembered that meeting he had attended. The Citizens Committee was behind him to a man, all right. And thinking of man in the singular turned his thoughts to a course they had followed on previous occasions. It was his opinion—an opinion unvoiced to any La Paz citizen—that the depredations of the outlaws swaggering about

this gold town were directed by one man, and one only.

When they found a lawman, he would tell him as much. "Nail the kingpin," he thought half aloud, "and the rest of the scum around this town will hit saddle leather."

A soft knock on the curtained front door of the shack that housed *The Clarion* interrupted Brant's half-uttered thoughts. All of the windows, too, had the shades drawn tightly over them.

This midnight job he'd wished upon himself had to be accomplished in strictest secrecy. There was, Brant knew, risk attached to it.

This was not the first camp where he had spoken his thoughts, but Brant Jackson had vowed that it would be the last. He was tired of wandering, tired of jolting behind a pair of mules drawing a wagon loaded with his type cases, press, and paper from boom camp to boom camp. Here was a place where a man might settle and grow with the community.

That Mother Nora Madden, who ran a boarding houses in the town, had a black-eyed daughter with a smile for a red-headed editor, might have influenced his decision, was something Brant wouldn't admit just yet.

The man knocking was likely a member of the Citizens Committee come to offer his services to speed the job at hand, Brant thought as he snapped back the bar closing the door.

Hell greeted him when he opened it. Brant caught a glimpse of six men in dark clothes with black handkerchiefs tied over their faces, and then an accurately hurled rock smashed the chimney of the single lamp hanging above his press and snuffed out the flame. Blackness settled down like a blanket. Brant felt the pleasant bite of his knuckles through the mask of one raider, and then the rest were surging in, the sheer weight of their bodies smashing him backward to the floor. A boot grazed his jaw, and red light flashed before his eyes. A grunt was driven from his lips as one of the masked sextette dropped solidly on his chest, and pinioned his arms.

Brant thrashed with his legs, beating a tattoo on the plank flooring, hopeful that the sound might carry into the street where some passerby would hear.

"Set on his legs!" a voice that sounded full of mush ordered. "I'll stuff his mouth with some of these dodgers." A streak of light from a carefully hooded lantern touched the Washington Press and the ink-wet posters.

Brant ceased his struggles. The masked leader's rough hands crammed wadded paper between his teeth. These men, he realized grimly, were not here to kill him. Their mission was destruction. And he might be able to make that destruction pay dividends for himself and La Paz.

Already two points could be chalked on the credit side of the ledger. No one but the members of the Citizens Committee had been in Woodal's store when they had laid their plans. That fact, linked one of the members with this masked sextette, for the vow of secrecy had been broken. Otherwise these men could not have gotten here so quickly.

The voice of their leader was another thing. A pebble or two lay in the man's mouth to disguise his speech. Only one reason could make such a thing necessary. The kingpin of this gang was afraid that he, Jackson, might recognize him.

Buckskin thongs bound his legs and arms now. A dirty bandanna, knotted behind his head, held the wet dodgers in his mouth. They were doing a thorough job of making him helpless, Brant saw ironically, and then he realized the reason for it, and red anger coursed with the blood through his veins.

This outfit was out to do more than destroy the notices he had been printing. They were bent on complete destruction of his plant. *The Clarion* was dying before his eyes!

Light from the lantern was touching different objects about the plant, and each thing that light touched was being wrecked. Tall typecases, were going over. A sledge hammer smashed at the Washington Press.

Jaws clamping, he had managed to spit out the handkerchief and wadded dodgers. Mouth free to speak, red-headed anger at this wanton destruction upset Brant's decision to hold his peace.

Through twisted lips he spoke his defiance. "Better kill me now," he said thickly. "If you don't, *The Clarion* will hound you to hell!"

THEIR shadowy leader had a heavy type stick in his hand. Brant saw the man step unhurriedly to his side. He stooped with callous deliberation and the stick descended. Brant went out cold. . . .

Soft street dust was beneath Brant's shoulders, and heat was stinging one side of his face when he awoke. A thought that was connected with the dodgers that had been crammed into his mouth tried to push its way through the pain in his head, but it could make no headway.

Finally, Brant managed to push heavy eyelids apart, and redness lay in front of his vision. Then the redness took on the shape of flames that seemed to be doing a macabre dance above what had been *The Clarion* plant.

Surprised that he could move, Brant realized that he had rolled onto his side. And then he saw that his bonds had been removed once that sextette had brought him to the street. He had nothing but a terrific headache and lump above his left ear to prove that he had ever been a prisoner of that masked band. That, and a print shop going up in smoke!

Men, their bodies like black paper cut-outs against the streaking flames, were pouring futile buckets of water into the blazing pyre of *The Clarion*.

A keg-bodied, stubby-legged figure in wide-bottom, tight-legged breeches, loose blue shirt, and tremendous cone-peaked sombrero scuttled from the bucket brigade to his side. It was Tomas Lopez, *Clarion* man of all work. There were La Paz citizens who figured the Mexican didn't have a brain inside his head, and that the Colt he wore was purely ornamental. Those were the citizens who did not know Tomas. In fact there were times, Brant had often reflected, when he wasn't so certain that he knew the Mexican himself. Of only one thing was he certain. Tomas Lopez' loyalty to *The Clarion* was above question.

The keg-bodied Mexican squatted beside him, white teeth gleaming in the red brightness of the night. "Ah, señor," he exclaimed, "you are well again! *Dios*, but those fools are wasting the Colorado river on those flames, while you lay here with the busted *cabeza*. Myself, I would have carried you to the doctor, but I

theenk mebbe no. No, Tomas, I say, your *patrone* will rather wake right here and tell me of the peeg who heet him so that I can go whet the blade of my *cuchillo* on his heart!"

Brant let the Mexican help him to a sitting position, and his tongue felt dry in his mouth as he tried to concentrate on the thought that had been in his mind on opening his eyes. Something to do with the dodgers he had been printing, and the handful of them that had been crammed in his mouth.

"*Mi patrone*," Lopez said anxiously, "you do not speak."

Brant shook his head. The answer to the question in his mind would not come. He focussed his gaze on the other man's round face. "If there's any whetting to do," he said grimly, "I'll do it myself."

"*Bueno*," Tomas Lopez agreed. He looked at the crumbling board shack. "So now *The Clarion* she burn," he said slowly. "*Por dios*, we weel not let that stop the magic letters that write many times. I have a leetle dinero!"

Brant's face twisted as he cut his helper short. "It'll take more than money, amigo, to bring *The Clarion* to life again. Type and presses come from New York around the Horn to San Pedro. Then down the coast of Baja California to the Gulf, and up it to the Colorado, where it must be loaded onto river boats. I'm afraid it will be a long year before *The Clarion* speaks its piece again."

The Mexican's mouth drew down at the corners. "*Verdad*, and that ees a long time, *mi patrone*." Then his face brightened. "But there is nothing the matter with your tongue. All the paper she do is speak your thoughts."

"People won't buy subscriptions to hear me spout words," Brant said.

"So, that puts us both out of job, no?"

Tomas Lopez watched Brant's eyes turn to him, and to the Mexican it seemed that they held a red-gold glow.

"Mebbe we'll both have new jobs come morning, amigo!" A mirthless chuckle ended his statement.

"I'm afraid it's no use, Jackson. Your shop is gone." Henry Woodall was the speaker. Burnsides bristling, he had come bustling from the bucket line to stand above Lopez and Brant.

(Continued on page 104)

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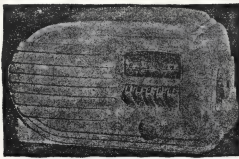
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(Continued from page 102)

Slowly, Brant looked up at the merchant, and signed for the Mexican to help him rise. Eyes on a level with Woodal's, he stared at the merchant. But before he could speak, Asa Keyes, the blacksmith, and other members of the Citizens Committee who had been in the bucket brigade came to join them.

Keyes was soot-smudged and panting. "We're wastin' time, Jackson," he boomed. "Air you fit to lead a posse after the whelps who cracked you over the noggin and burned you out?"

Brant switched his gaze to the big blacksmith, and his thick sandy brows arched inquiringly. "Are you a mind-reader?" he asked coolly.

The blacksmith chuckled. "Shucks, Jackson, they was tracks leadin' to your door, and that lump above the ear spells a crack on the noggin to me. Saw on oil can going up in the blaze and that spells arson. But we're wastin' time."

Mirthless laughter touched Brant's lips. "You're right, Keyes. And we'd be wasting more time if we started goose-chasing around these hills in the dark. Long as we're all up," he continued, "and most of the Committee is in the bucket line, I suggest, Woodal, that you tell our outfit to meet at your store, pronto."

"But—" the merchant started.

Brant rode him down with a wave of his hand. "I'm the loser tonight," he said with edged coldness in his voice, "and I've got a few things to tell the Committee that won't wait."

At the single room adobe beyond the outskirts of La Paz which Lopez called home, the Mexican carefully bathed and bandaged the lump above Brant's ear.

"*Por Dios*," he stood back to examine his handiwork, "she is one fine bandage, and your *cabesa* will be well come the dawn, señor. I promise it on the sacred name of my grandmother. I also promise that from now on your *casa* will be yours. For thees, all I ask ees the wan leetle favor, *mi patrone*."

Brant grinned at the Mexican. "And what is that, amigo?"

"That you tal me what you mean by that talk of us having new jobs."

"We'll both know more about the new job within the next half hour, amigo," he

said, and then headed for the door. . . .

Twenty minutes later, Brant faced a grimly attentive committee in the big main room of Woodal's General Store. Some of the members, he noticed, had taken time to scrub up at the horse trough out in front of the store. A few were still grimy, soot from blackened timbers staining their faces and hand. Sight of the contrast was like a shutter opening in his mind, and suddenly Brant had the answer to the question that had been perplexing him since he had wakened in the dust of La Paz's single street.

Silence held the men as his hazel eyes passed over them, and he could read the thought in their minds. "Most of you," he said quietly, "are wondering what happens next. The death of *The Clarion* is outlaw answer to decency. A stab in the back, a slap in the face to each one of us. However, I told them *The Clarion* would wound them to hell—and it will!"

Henry Woodal cleared his throat. "Just what do you mean by that, Jackson? Your shop is a total loss."

Brant's nostrils flared. "I'm still here," he said quietly, "and out of a job!"

Asa Keyes had jumped to his feet. He pawed with sooty hands at his curly brown beard. "Boys, I think we been lookin' too far for marshal material!" he exclaimed. "Name me a man with a bigger stake to revenge than Brant Jackson hyar. I'm for offerin' him the star we got beggin'! Anybody second me?"

♦ ♦ ♦

ROARING agreement was his answer. Before the ayes had subsided, Henry Woodal had a six-pointed gold badge out of his pocket. "Sometimes," he said gravely, "adversity is man's greatest friend. Perhaps I am selfish in saying that I hope this new task you are undertaking will bring peace to us all."

With the star glowing proudly against his checkered vest, Brant looked out at the committeemen.

"Likely," he drawled, "you're all wondering just what happened tonight. I'm going to tell you, and when I get done I'll have a simple request to make."

HELL'S FIVE-STAR FINAL

"And what might it be?" Henry Wood-al asked.

Brant's eyes were like gunbarrels focussing on the merchant. "You'll all learn soon enough," he said gently.

The very softness of his words brought tension into the store. Men began to look curiously at one another, then their attention was caught again as Brant continued his quiet talk.

"Six masked men put me down to-night," he told them, "and they made their biggest mistake when they didn't kill me. They made a few other mistakes, too. I marked them all down in my head, and those mistakes are going to hang a man in this room, or bring him death!"

The silence was electric now.

Deliberately, Brant let his statement hold them, and then he continued in the same soft tones. "The leader of the sextette had pebbles in his mouth to disguise his voice. To me that means he knows that I would have recognized his normal tones. Also he knew the job I was doing, and yet he had taken a vow of secrecy along with the rest of us. Shortly we will conduct a little experiment that will prove matters one way or the other."

Again Brant paused. He watched the tension mount in this room. It was the thing he wanted. Once in Phoenix he had watched a leader bring music from an orchestra with a movement of his hand. That leader had played upon the emotions of his musicians. He had controlled them. In a grimly different way, he was holding the same power over this group now, for death would strike the final chord in this symphony.

"The men who entered *The Clarion* knew what they were looking for," Brant went on, in the same soft, chilly tones. "They were after the dodgers I was printing for distribution this morning." He drew a long breath, and the thought that had been trying to break through the fog translated itself into words.

"Yes, they were after the dodgers I was printing. Some had already come off the press, but *the ink on them was still wet*. Their leader used a handful of them to gag me. Printer's ink," and he expressed the elusive thought, "*is not easy to wash off your hands!*"

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Some of us, I have noticed, have not troubled to wash up since the fire at my plant. Gentlemen, I told you I would have a request to make. There is a horse trough outside. Is there any man in this group unwilling to scrub his hands?"

Two Colts roared almost simultaneously in the sudden silence. Brant felt the iron-hot scrape of lead across his ribs, and the blow flung him to the right, but his eyes were still clear as he watched Asa Keyes stumble upright from his chair. A smoking gun that he'd surreptitiously drawn hung from his lax fingers, and death had already drawn a curtain of blankness across his broad face as his knees relaxed and pitched him forward.

Tomas Lopez, smooth as a cougar for all his stubby legs, had reached Brant's side. His white teeth were flashing as he blew the curling blue smoke from the muzzle of his Colt.

"Por Dios," he said severely, "you will be wan dead marshal my pronto, mi patrone, eef you go around telling the stories like thees wan without the Colt in your fist."

Without replying, Brant moved to the blacksmith's side. He lifted one of the man's hands, and brushed away the soot covering his fingers. Beneath it lay a darker stain.

Henry Woodal had joined him beside the dead man. Wordlessly Brant gestured at the mute testimony of guilt, and shock was still in him for in his own mind he had half-suspected the merchant crouched beside him.

Woodal's face was gray and sober as he put his hand on Brant's arm. "This must be as great a shock to you as to me," he murmured softly. "Asa Keyes was a good blacksmith." His eyes rose challengingly to sweep the committeemen. "Let us see," he said soberly, "if this secret can be kept better than the last one. It will be enough for the outlaws in this town to know that their leader is dead. The rest of the community need not know how he died. On his headstone let us say only that Asa Keyes was a good blacksmith."

For the first time, Brant found himself liking the merchant. "I'll say amen to that," he finished quietly.

THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE

(Continued from page 93)

sunlight was reaching lower and lower into the well as the sun approached noon. Jim fumed. Jim swore and gritted his teeth in an impatience that was anguished.

I won't ever get to Meecham's Ferry in time to stop Pete Nolan! He'll cross the river and go on east with the \$4,000 and I'll never set eyes on him again! Damn the rotten luck!

And then Jim's heart choked up into his throat. Benny had become a limp, dead weight in his arms. But the boy was still breathing. Asleep, that's all. Likely hadn't slept all night.

Straight overhead the sun was when finally Mary was bending over the well again, was calling down, "I've g-got the rope!"

"Thank the Lord you're back! Pull the rope up and tie your new piece onto the end."

"All right."

"You sure took your time!" Jim snapped. "You must've *walked* all the way back!"

"No," she gasped. "I ran."

Jim didn't get her meaning, just then. His mind was too full. He was thinking that it would be late at night before he got to Meecham's Ferry, now.

The lengthened rope came down into the well again. Jim made the end fast about young Benny's chest.

"Benny, I'll climb up, now. Then I'll pull you up!"

"Don't hurry. I'm just fine, sir," the boy said pluckily.

Climbing down into the well hadn't been easy; climbing up was infinitely harder. And for all his rugged young strength, when Jim finally swung himself out of the well hole, he collapsed on the ground and lay there gasping, gulping in breath, waiting for his heart to ease its mad pounding.

Just a minute he rested. Mary's anxious face prodded him into work. He seized the rope and, hand over hand, he hauled scrawny young Benny to the surface. Mary seized the boy in her arms and wept.

"Shucks, Mary, he's all right. Let me set his busted arm. Then I got to ride for Meecham's fast as my hoss can leg it."



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

"We can't ever thank you enough, Jim."

"Forget it." Working fast, Jim crudely bound the boy's arm in a splint from a broken board, using lengths torn from a petticoat which Mary gave him. Finishing, Jim looked around for the horses. Sudden consternation made him start.

"Say, where're your Tiptoe horse and my bronc?"

"They're not here. I m-mean, I rode your horse home. Tiptoe wasn't tied, and she followed. I ran into the house to get a rope, and I saw a band of Indians coming and they took the horses."

"Say, is this a joke?" Jim demanded furiously. "I got to have my horse! Don't tell me Indians took 'em, blast it. The local Indians are peaceable."

"But they did take the horses. I was afraid, and I hid in the root cellar till they were gone. Then I ran all the way here."

"You poor benighted pilgrim!" Jim raved. "All those Indians wanted was a handout."

"They took all the food in the house, and my rifle, and my silver cup and my napkin rings and killed our dog; then they took the horses and left."

Jim turned away. It wasn't right to curse in front of a nice girl. But damn it, blast it, plague and curse it—

He was not only a half day late, but he was afoot! He'd never make it to Meecham's in time, now. He'd never catch up with Pete Nolan. The dirty crook would get clear away with that \$4,000!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Red Terror

JIM carried young Benny to Mary's cabin. Jim didn't linger there, however. He moseyed right on down the road toward Meecham's. He made himself quit thinking about his crooked partner. Made himself focus all his planning on borrowing a team and wagon from his friend Cagle, on the Little Blue, and going to Tekamah to do freighting for the army.

When he first noticed the smoke rising

THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE

from the prairie, black and grim against the setting sun, it had no special meaning for him. Not until he got close did he see that the McNellis place was now just the smouldering ruins of what had been a well-built house. The corrals nearby were empty of stock.

And then Jim stopped short, frozen in his tracks. A child lay huddled on the ground against the corral fence. A girl. Jim darted forward, bent over the youngster; and Jim's innards knotted with giddy shock. The child had an arrow in her back. A little farther on, Jim found the stalwart, black-bearded figure of Luke McNellis sprawled in the dust; and in his body were a dozen arrows.

Jim delayed only long enough to find blankets in the sod stable. With these he covered the two still figures.

Two miles farther down the road, he came upon a stagecoach, overturned onto its side, charred and smouldering from an attempt to burn it. The horses were gone: traces were cut, as if the passengers had hurriedly slashed the animals loose and mounted them to flee for their lives. At first, in the dusk, Jim saw no victims. Then he found the driver, Luke Carruthers. Staked out on the prairie, weathered face frozen in agony. Jim kept moving. It was safest, now, to travel at night.

A thin new moon lifted in the east. The night was quiet, ominously quiet. He'd keep walking, Jim figured, till he reached the next stage station, and spend the night there. And then he saw wagons in the eerie half-light.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Dozens, scores of wagons—some seventy wagons of a big freight outfit stretched out alongside the road. The regular freight train that rolled to Denver. The mules were gone. Some of the mule skimmers were here, though—dead, scalped, mutilated. And the wagons had been looted of their contents. What had been wanted by the Indians was gone; the rest was scattered over the prairie in wild destruction. Jim hurried on. Sleep was impossible this night. . . .

It was daylight when he neared Meecham's Ferry, near the junction of the Republican River with the Kansas.

Reaching Meecham's cabin and store, then, he found a crowd of men—white men—farmers and cowmen. They were armed, and no women were among them. They formed a defense posse, hastily called together against the Indian raiders. Silently and grimly, the men were busy digging graves. A dozen people had been killed here. But Pete Nolan's body was not among the lot.

"So Pete got across the river before the raid. He would, damn him!" Jim swore to himself.

He asked some questions. It was the Sioux and Cheyenne who had attacked the place at sundown, last night. Led by Black Kettle.

"Them Injuns raided along the whole road east and west of here, from the Big Sandy clear to Denver," Jim was told. "Parties of 'em hit every ranch and stage station just at noon. Looks like they had these raids all planned out weeks ahead of time. At Varnum's Station, Cagle's, Ozawkie, Smoky Hill, Deke Kysler's—ain't a white man or woman left alive."*

*This was one of the most savage of Indian attacks on the prairies—the raids of August 7, 1864. Groups of Cheyenne and Sioux, under the generalship of Black Kettle, approached road ranches and stage stations as if friendly, and were received in the usual friendly fashion by whites. Suddenly the Indians started shooting. . . . This far-flung Indian attack sent fear wild-firing over the plains. Settlers piled belongings onto wagons and, driving cattle before them, headed in a mass exodus eastward toward the Missouri. Panic practically depopulated the prairies. This mass flight from threat of the Indians was afterward known as "The Stampede."

THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE

Jim's heart did a flipflop. If he had kept on his schedule, if he had not stopped to help Mary McGaa find her blamed old cow, and to get young Benny out of that abandoned well—he would have reached here in time to confront Pete Nolan. He would have shot Pete, and fled to Cagle's on the Little Blue—and reached there just in time to die under Sioux arrow and tomahawk with all the other unsuspecting settlers. Pete would never have gone on east to spend that \$4,000. *But I wouldn't have it, either! Leastways, damned little good it would be doing me, with my hair lifted and a dozen good Sioux arrows stuck in my carcass!*

Jim mopped his sweating brow. Lord, what a narrow escape he'd had!



JIM went on to Kansas City. Chances were that he could get a job as a shotgun guard with one of the stage lines. The coaches now would be traveling with added protection.

Reaching Kansas City, Jim went to the Drovers Hotel, to wash, shave, and sleep. Entering the crowded downstairs lobby, he realized that he might not be able to get a room. For the city was full of prairie refugees, and the hotel was crowded.

Abruptly Jim froze in his tracks. To the left of him a familiar voice was booming away. Jim turned, his nerves screwing tight.

There, talking to an interested group, was the familiar lanky, stoop-shouldered

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figure of Pete Nolan. His dark hair was awry as usual and, an ingratiating grin on his sallow face, Nolan was jawing away in his usual headlong fashion.

Something hot and wild flared in Jim.

A single swift, furious stride brought him within reach. He grabbed Nolan's narrow shoulder, whirled him around, smacked him open-handed across the face so violently that Nolan staggered sideways over a chair onto the floor.

"Get up!" Jim said. "Get up, you rat. I got a gun in my belt, and you carry a derring in your pocket."

The crowd melted away from around them.

Nolan didn't get up. Eyes bulging, he stared at Jim, feeling his jaw with one hand.

"My God, Jim, you like to busted my — Jim, I was afraid you'd been killed when I heard how the ranchers west of —"

"Get up, damn you!"

"What's wrong, Jim?"

"You gettin' up or do I have to yank you onto your feet?"

"You will have to give me a hand," Pete Nolan said mildly, "on 'count of I got a Cheyenne arrow through my leg and have to lean on a chair to stand."

Angry words choked in Jim's throat. He stared at Pete, his rugged young face reddening with hot color.

"I didn't intend to hit a cripple," Jim stammered, impulsively leaning to help Nolan stand up. But his anger came back. "Though I ought to kill you!"

"What for? What in blazes has happened, Jim?"

"Don't start that slick tongue of yours to workin'! You robbed me. Sold me out, ruined all my plans!"

"Sure, I sold the ranch. To get some cash in a hurry."

"I trusted you, and that was the biggest fool mistake I ever made!"

"Good Lord, Jim," Pete Nolan gasped, "you're figurin' I robbed you?"

"What in hell else would you call it?"

"I figured I'd be back at the ranch 'fore you arrived, to explain. The Injuns prevented that. Jim, I didn't rob you—I just finished something you started!"

THE RED TIDE OF MASSACRE

Jim stared. "What're you talkin' about?"

"You wanted to buy up that section of land west of our ranch, because you figured that Two Rivers was going to be the county seat. I knew you were countin' heavy on that. So when Loren Mapes—he's publishin' that weekly newspaper over in Hayes—when he stopped by and told me he'd been takin' a poll of settlers to see how they were going to vote in the county seat matter, I asked questions. Finally he told me that Two Rivers wasn't gettin' the votes as county seat at all."

"Two Rivers *not* going to be the county seat?" Jim gasped.

"No! Most of the settlers are pickin' Hayes for county seat. You were figurin' wrong, Jim."

"Good Lord!" Jim mopped his brow. "If we'd bought that land around Two Rivers, we'd've been stuck. We'd have been holding worthless land!"

"Yeah. Now, Mapes had got options on nigh all the land around Hayes that's for sale, but he didn't have cash to go ahead and buy. He said he'd take you'n me in as partners if we'd put up the money. So I rode over to see Mike Lassen, and sold our spread to him at his own price, for cash. And that \$4,000 is enough for Mapes to buy up three quarter-sections of land around Hayes. Of course, this Injun scare will postpone organizing the county for a while. But when the trouble blows over, Jim, you and me and Mapes are all set to make a hundred thousand dollars apiece!" Nolan grinned at Jim. "Still want to kill me, partner?"

Jim choked out, "Good Lord, no!"

"And you don't hate me?"

Nolan's grin widened.

"You're the best friend I ever had!"

Nolan's hand tightened on Jim's arm.

"Gosh, Jim, I was scared crazy that you'd been killed. Come on, help me over to the bar. We got to drink to our luck!"

"Luck? No, sir!" said Jim. "Me, I'm drinkin' to a widow lady named McGaa—a widow lady who ain't going to be a single lady very long! Me, I got plans!"

THE END

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